

HBO AND THE HOLOCAUST:
CONSPIRACY, THE HISTORICAL FILM, AND PUBLIC HISTORY AT WANNSEE

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HBO and the Holocaust: *Conspiracy*, the Historical Film, and Public History at Wannsee

In 2001, Home Box Office aired *Conspiracy*, a dramatization of the infamous Wannsee Conference organized by Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann. The Conference took place in Berlin on 20 January 1942 and was intended to coordinate the Final Solution by asserting the dominance of Heydrich and the SS over other governmental departments. The surviving Wannsee Protocol stands as one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the Third Reich's genocidal intent and emblematic of its shift from mass shootings in the occupied East to industrial-scale murder. *Conspiracy*, written by Loring Mandel and directed by Frank Pierson, is an unusual historical film because it reenacts the Wannsee Conference in real time, devoid of the usual clichés prevalent throughout Holocaust films. It also engages with historiographical arguments and makes a few of its own. This thesis argues that dramatic film has been relatively ignored by the public history field and uses *Conspiracy* as a case study for how dramatic film and television can be used to further the goals of public history, especially that of making complex and difficult histories accessible to wide audiences. Grounded in a thorough reading of script drafts, production notes, HBO meeting minutes, and correspondence, this thesis examines *Conspiracy* from the vantage point of scholarship in public history, film studies, and Holocaust studies. It details the film's production history, the sources used for the film, the claims it makes, and advocates for dramatic film as a powerful public history outlet. Ultimately, this thesis argues that *Conspiracy* is exactly the type of historical film that historians should be making themselves.

Raymond J. Haberski, Ph.D., Chair

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Public History, Film, and Wannsee	1
Chapter Two: <i>Conspiracy's</i> Production Process and Public History	32
Chapter Three: <i>Die Wannseekonferenz</i> and <i>Conspiracy</i>	65
Bibliography	98
Curriculum Vitae	

“Historians must take an interest in the audiovisual world, if they are not to become schizophrenics, rejected by society as the representatives of an outmoded erudition.”¹

Chapter One: Public History, Film, and Wannsee

I. Introduction

This thesis examines HBO’s *Conspiracy* (2001) as an example of a dramatic historical film as a public history method. *Conspiracy* is an Anglo-American dramatization of the Wannsee Conference, an event that took place on 20 January 1942. *Conspiracy* dramatizes this meeting by recreating it in real time; the conference lasted ninety minutes, so does the film. The plot and dialogue are based off of the surviving meeting minutes, but most of the dialogue is invented as the minutes are not a verbatim transcript. *Conspiracy* focuses on how educated, middle-aged men met in a charming villa to discuss the logistics of mass murder. The camera rarely leaves the meeting table, and its documentary-style techniques, including eye-level placement and the use of long takes and close-ups, place the audience at the meeting rather than at a more distanced vantage point. Unlike most other Holocaust films, it portrays no victims, it tugs at no heartstrings. The men joke about the effects of gassing Jews to death, they get drunk, they allow petty jealousies and institutional rivalries to surface. There are no heroes in this film, there is no uplifting message or happy end. The film portrays key personalities of the Third Reich, most notably those of Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann, but it also explores the power struggles between different institutions. In doing so, the film raises important questions about the inner workings of the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and the importance of the Wannsee Conference itself.

¹ Pierre Sorlin, “How to Look at an ‘Historical’ Film,” in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 25–49. 26.

Conspiracy is not the first filmic adaptation of the Wannsee Conference. It is a remake of a 1984 West German/Austrian film, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, which stood out among a wave of historical television productions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although *Conspiracy* began as a remake of *Die Wannseekonferenz*, the two films are similar on only a surface level. They both reflect the historiographical trends in their respective countries during the decades in which they were produced and are attempts to make that historiography and history accessible to wide audiences. They are also the products of different directorial and screenwriting visions. Due to a large archival collection containing production material for *Conspiracy*, this thesis focuses on *Conspiracy* more than *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Nevertheless, it is important to discuss the earlier film as it is also a work of public history in its own right.

This chapter provides context for using HBO's *Conspiracy* (2001) as a case study for regarding dramatic film as public history. Using *Conspiracy* as a case study illustrates the entire history of the film: its conception, writing process, historical research, production meetings, filming, and reception. Before doing so, it is necessary to examine public history as a practice, how the discipline has been traditionally defined, current trends in the field, and how dramatic historical film (as opposed to documentary) can fit into the wider public history framework. Using the production history of a dramatic film as a case study allows this thesis to examine the challenges—and advantages—of using dramatic film as a public history method in a way that goes beyond mere analysis of a finished film.

The chapter will first provide a brief history of the Wannsee Conference, the infamous meeting and basis for these two films. It outlines various ways of analyzing historical films, including those that address the problematic aspects of “fictionalizing” historical events. This chapter will move to an exploration of history on film, how several historians have been grappling with this issue, and how their ideas inform the methodology.

These historians have explored the issues surrounding fictionalizing historical events and argue that a degree of fictionalization is absolutely necessary due to the constraints of dramatic film as a medium, but that fictionalization has to be kept within reason. Beyond methodological issues, it will then discuss the different issues and challenges posed by depicting the Holocaust on film. Scholars, filmmakers, Holocaust survivors, journalists, and others consistently debate the ethics of depicting the Holocaust, an event that some have deemed “unrepresentable,” on film. *Conspiracy* and *Die Wannseekonferenz* (1984) will be placed in the wider context of Holocaust film and allowing analysis of both films in the second and third chapters, which will, in part, look at the two films as examples of two very different waves in the history of Anglo-American and German television.

This history will also explore key historiographical debates surrounding the conference, and it will briefly touch on predominant trends in Holocaust historiography relevant to each film’s respective historical arguments. Three sections: public history and film, the Holocaust on film, and the history of the Wannsee Conference will provide necessary background to the following chapters. These chapters will analyze the filmmaking process behind *Conspiracy*, compare *Conspiracy* with its predecessor *Die Wannseekonferenz*, examine the reception of both films, and evaluate both films as works of public history. *Conspiracy* and *Die Wannseekonferenz* are part of a subset of Holocaust films that have an “explicitly educative or consciousness-raising agenda, or which consciously engage with academic historical interpretation of the Holocaust.”² This distinction is important. Historians have also analyzed historical HBO dramas like *Deadwood* and argued for them as works of historical interpretation that can compete with traditional, physical public history

² Barry Langford, “Mass Culture/Mass Media/Mass Death: Teaching Film, Television, and the Holocaust,” in *Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Eaglestone and Barry Langford, First Edition edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63–77. 64.

sites.³ After all, engagement in historiographical debates is one of the cornerstones of the historical profession. If this is not an example of “doing history” or public history on film, there is very little else that could be. Films are significant for public historians because they attract large audiences, spawn public debates, especially in the press, and often serve as the “gateway” to history for their audiences. By seeing film as mere entertainment or a purely profit-driven enterprise, historians can miss out on how film can enter into historiographical conversations and ignore how it influences mass audiences. Dramatic films do not compete with or replace traditional history, but complement it. *Conspiracy* does so by responding to various historiographical trends and by making historiographical arguments of its own.

II. Wannsee

Conspiracy and *Die Wannseekonferenz* are dramatic reconstructions of the Wannsee Conference that unfold in real time. The Wannsee Conference occurred on 20 January 1942 in a villa overlooking the Wannsee, a lake west of Berlin. The meeting took place at Am Großen Wannsee 56-58, which served as a guesthouse for traveling members of the SS security police and SD, the intelligence arm of the SS.⁴ Reinhard Heydrich led both organizations, along with the Gestapo, under the umbrella of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA).⁵ Heydrich led the meeting, the stated goal of which was to discuss coordinating policy for “the Final Solution of the European Jewish question.”⁶ Adolf Eichmann, at the

³ Andrew Urban, “Review of Legends of Deadwood,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 224–31.

⁴ Johannes Tuchel, *Am Großen Wannsee 56-58: Von der Villa Minoux zum Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1992). 108.

⁵ Mark Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Penguin Books, 2002). 14.

⁶ Mark Roseman, trans., “Appendix A: Translation of the Protocol,” in *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 108–18. 109. When directly quoting from the Wannsee Protocol, I will use Mark Roseman’s translation from *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting*. For the German original, see the scans located on the Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz website:

time Heydrich's expert on Jewish affairs, organized the meeting of high-ranking members of the SS, the Nazi Party, and civilian ministries whose missions were concerned with the Jewish Question, including ministries with which the SS had previously had difficulty.⁷ Civilian attendees were mostly Staatssekretäre, or State Secretaries, a rank roughly approximating that of the US under-secretary of state.⁸ The main evidence for the meeting consists of a fifteen-page protocol—written by Adolf Eichmann—that records the meeting minutes in the evasive, euphemistic language of bureaucracy. This protocol, discovered by the Nuremberg Trial prosecution team in 1947, “remains the most emblematic and programmatic statement of the Nazi way of doing genocide.”⁹ Wannsee has captured the imaginations of historians and the public since the Protocol's discovery. As historian Katie Digan notes, “...the document and the meeting have become a powerful symbol of the Holocaust for the wider public.”¹⁰ The Protocol begins with a list of attendees and their organizations, then moves into a discussion of Nazi persecution of the Jews up to that date and a list of the Jewish populations of every European country totaling over 11 million. Due to the war, the previous Nazi policy of Jewish emigration had become untenable, so the “new solution” of “evacuating Jews to the east” was underway.¹¹ The Protocol is full of euphemism like “evacuation,” but its genocidal intent is clear, especially in a section describing the future use of Jews to work on “constructing roads” in the East:

http://www.ghwk.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf-wannsee/dokumente/protokoll-januar1942_barrierefrei.pdf (PAAA Berlin, R 100857, Bl. 166-180)

⁷ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (London: Penguin Books, 2010). 260.

⁸ Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 57.

⁹ Ibid. 1-2.

¹⁰ Katie Digan, *Places of Memory: The Case of the House of the Wannsee Conference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). 23.

¹¹ Roseman, “Appendix A: Translation of the Protocol.” 111.

Doubtless the large majority will be eliminated by natural causes. Any final remnant that survives will doubtless consist of the most resistant elements. They will have to be dealt with appropriately, because otherwise, by natural selection, they would form the germ cell of a new Jewish revival. (See the experience of history).¹²

Europe was to be “combed through from west to east” of Jews, who would be sent to “transit ghettos” before heading eastwards. The Protocol then includes an extensive discussion on the treatment of so-called *Mischlinge*, or persons of partial Jewish ancestry.¹³ The Nuremberg Laws—or The Law for the Defense of German Blood and Honor—were enacted in 1935. They based citizenship on blood, stripping Jews of their civil rights, and forbidding marriage and sexual relations between Jews and Germans. The Nuremberg Laws were intended to further isolate the Jewish population during the 1930s and to encourage emigration.¹⁴ The Protocol records Heydrich and the conference attendees reviewing these laws and advocating evacuation or mass sterilization depending on whether the people in question were “persons of mixed blood of the first degree” (half-Jews), “persons of mixed blood of the second degree” (quarter-Jews), Jews married to Germans, or “persons of mixed blood” married to Germans. State Secretary Dr. Wilhelm Stuckart, representing the Reich Ministry for the Interior and architect of the Nuremberg Laws, argued for forced sterilization across the board due to the “endless administrative work” that the above-discussed parsing of different classifications of Jews would entail. State Secretary Dr. Josef Bühler requested that the Final Solution begin in the Generalgouvernement as quickly as possible. Finally, the meeting was ended after “the various possible kinds of solution were discussed.”¹⁵

¹² Ibid, 113.

¹³ Ibid, 113-114.

¹⁴ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1: The Years of Persecution 1933-1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). 142.

¹⁵ Roseman, “Appendix A: Translation of the Protocol.” 117-118.

In her influential *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Hannah Arendt controversially portrayed Adolf Eichmann as epitomizing the “banality of evil” stereotype has become cliché when discussing Nazis. Essentially, this concept refers to conscienceless and thoughtless bureaucrats who followed orders because they were orders, not because they necessarily believed in them. The “banality of evil” is an attempt to square the ordinariness of Nazi perpetrators with the extraordinariness of their crimes. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt describes Eichmann’s presence at Wannsee as that of a glorified secretary who held little importance at the meeting.¹⁶ Almost all histories of the Wannsee Conference disagree with Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann, as this depiction of Eichmann as relatively unimportant requires taking Eichmann’s dishonest testimony in Jerusalem at face value. The creators of both films grappled with this depiction, with *Conspiracy* pushing back against it a bit more than *Die Wannseekonferenz*. The differing characterizations of Eichmann will be explored in detail in Chapter Three.

The historiography of the Wannsee Conference centers on just how important the conference was in the history of the Holocaust. Wannsee has often been erroneously seen as a “smoking gun” for the Holocaust. The Third Reich’s campaign of mass murder had begun after the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, making it impossible to claim that the Wannsee Conference was the turning point where Nazi leaders decided to annihilate all of European Jewry. Note that mass shootings had taken place throughout the occupied East prior to Wannsee and that Major Rudolf Lange, a conference attendee, had firsthand

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010). 113-114.

experience in leading these executions, making him unique among the attendees.¹⁷ This is further complicated by the lack of a Hitler order, e.g. a “smoking gun” for the Holocaust.

Historians are in general agreement, however, about the Conference serving to establish the dominance and preeminence of Heydrich, Himmler, and the SS in all matters related to the Final Solution.¹⁸ Even historians who argue against the Wannsee Conference as a turning point in the history of the Final Solution concede on this point.¹⁹ Historian Mark Roseman argues that the main purpose of Wannsee was to establish RSHA (and SS) dominance over the civilian ministries represented at the conference—and make them complicit in genocide.²⁰ Nikolaus Wachsmann, historian of the concentration camp system, has pointed to the lack of a representative from the growing concentration camp empire as evidence of the camps being absent from the meeting’s content.²¹ This echoes Wolfgang Scheffler’s argument about Heydrich using the conference to “reassert a declining position” as the concentration camp system fell outside of his realm.²² The most convincing arguments see Wannsee as a moment in time that captures a transition to industrial-scale genocide. The German historian Peter Longerich has characterized the Protocol as a “snapshot of a transitional period.”²³ Roseman echoes this by referring to Wannsee as a “keyhole” or a “signpost indicating that genocide had become official policy” which provides us with a

¹⁷ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941-1944*, First English Language Edition (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009). 261-262.

¹⁸ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination*, Reprint edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008). 343.

¹⁹ Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman: The Life of Heydrich*, 1st Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). 210.

²⁰ Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 83-86.

²¹ Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, 1st Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). 295.

²² Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 83.

²³ Mark Roseman, “‘Wannsee’ als Herausforderung: Die Historiker und die Konferenz,” in *Die Wannsee-Konferenz vom 20. Januar 1942: Planung und Beginn des Genozids an den europäischen Juden*, ed. Peter Longerich, Norbert Kampe, and Peter Klein (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1998), 401–14. 44.

window onto how the Third Reich transitioned from mass shootings to industrial killing.²⁴ It is in this idea—Wannsee as keyhole—that *Conspiracy* excels at “translating” the complicated history of the Holocaust’s origins for a mass audience.

III. Public History and Dramatic Film

Public history is a movement with a myriad of identities. There is no discernable difference between the practice of public history and that practiced in the academy in terms of research methodology or rigorousness of the scholarship. The key distinction, rather, is one of audience. Public history’s main purpose to make complex pasts **accessible** to wide audiences. It has traditionally focused on history outside of the academy, most notably in museums, archives, national parks, living history centers, and governmental agencies. Typically, film is included in this wide definition, but often only documentary films such as those by Ken Burns. The relative neglect of dramatic film is not due to any innate conservatism among public historians, but rather in the wider historical profession itself. One scholar charges that historians, in general, have been “profoundly skeptical” and dismissive of non-documentary film.²⁵ Nevertheless, dramatic film is beginning to be taken seriously by the public history profession and has generated an enormous amount of historical scholarship since the 1980s.

Different institutions, academic programs, and individual historians all have their own definitions of just what public history is. The National Council on Public History (NCPH) defines public history as “the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world” and argues that the less-common term “applied history” is more

²⁴ Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 79, 106-107.

²⁵ William Guynn, *Writing History in Film* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2006). 1-2.

accurate.²⁶ Writing for the American Historical Association, Robert Weible argues that defining the field may be an exercise in futility because “public history may even be like jazz or pornography: easier to describe than define, and you know it when you hear it or see it.”²⁷

The public historian Philip V. Scarpino argues that public history is “a way of understanding and practicing the craft of history” and that “communication” to a wide audience is what truly distinguishes public history from the history traditionally practiced in the academy.²⁸ Echoing this sentiment, Library of Congress historian Jason Steinhauer advocates a vision of public historians as “history communicators” who translate complex histories for the public and utilize every means of available media, including television and internet video platforms like Vine and YouTube.²⁹ This broader idea of public history as a philosophy and methodology to disseminate historical knowledge to the public certainly has room for the dramatic film. If public history’s main priority is to communicate history to a wide audience, dramatic film, whether in the theater or on cable networks, has enormous potential to reach an audience of millions, vastly larger than most museum exhibits can ever hope to reach. In *The Presence of the Past* (1998), Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s landmark survey of American attitudes towards history, film and television come up as the most common way people encounter the past.³⁰ Film historian Anton Kaes echoes this line of thinking:

²⁶ “About the Field,” *National Council on Public History*, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

²⁷ Robert Weible, “Defining Public History: Is It Possible? Is It Necessary?,” *Perspectives on History*, March 2008, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2008/defining-public-history-is-it-possible-is-it-necessary>.

²⁸ Philip V. Scarpino, “Some Thoughts on Defining, Evaluating, and Rewarding Public Scholarship,” *The Public Historian* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1993) 55-61. 56.

²⁹ Jason Steinhauer, “Introducing History Communicators,” *National Council on Public History*, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/introducing-history-communicators/>.

³⁰ Roy Rosenzweig and David Paul Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). 31.

Surpassing schools and universities, film and television have become the most effective (and paradoxically least acknowledged) institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness. They are powerful because they can make history come alive more readily than commemorative addresses, lectures, exhibitions or museums; they can resituate past events in the immediate experience of the viewer.³¹

Some public history graduate programs have begun to include film and media as possible specializations. The University of West Florida offers a Film and Media History Specialization that works in concert with PBS and the university's Journalism Department.³² The relatively new MA program at Freie Universität Berlin emphasizes the relationship between media and history just as much as the “traditional” areas of public history, e.g. museums and memory culture. One of its stated goals is for “students [to] develop skills and competences which enable them to present historical problems and issues to the general public via different forms of media.”³³ NCPH includes “film and media producers” in its list of types of public historians.³⁴ The murky category of “media” often—but not always—appears in definitions of public history, but programs and institutions often define this conservatively, referring only to either documentary film or traditional journalism, (broadcast and print). For its part, Freie Universität Berlin encourages its public history students to take dramatic film seriously as a form of public history, and the department offers courses that focus on it and require extensive film analysis.³⁵

³¹ Anton Kaes, “History and Film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination,” *History and Memory* 2, no. 1 (1990): 111–29. 112.

³² University of West Florida, “Public History | University of West Florida,” accessed June 7, 2016, <http://uwf.edu/cassh/departments/history/graduate-programs/public-history/>.

³³ Freie Universität Berlin, “Master in Public History,” May 17, 2008, accessed June 7, 2016, http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/fmi/studium/masterstudium/public_history/index.html.

³⁴ “About the Field.”

³⁵ See <http://www.fu-berlin.de/vv/en/lv/212582?m=150192&pc=52959&sm=163783>, “Geschichtskultur: Anwendungsfelder in der Public History.” As part of this course, students produced extensive analyses of dramatic films.

Film, including dramatic film, is increasingly becoming accepted by the wider public history community. In 2003, NCPH's journal, *The Public Historian*, devoted an entire issue to film. This issue included contributions from several historians, and it touched on an array of dramatic films and documentaries including: *A History of Britain*, *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, *JFK*, *Reds*, *Mission to Moscow*, *Joan of Arc*; but its main focus is on how film can enhance understanding of history and be a useful tool for the public historian.

The issue's introduction, "History, Historians, and Visual Entertainment Media: Toward a Rapprochement," by Shelley Bookspan, argues that the common skepticism that historians show towards film stems from historians trained and socialized solely in written text. Analyzing visual language does not come as easily to historians, and the common criticism of historical films for using creative license also applies to the choices historians make when selecting sources and writing history. She argues that "it is time for the disciplines of history and film to cross-fertilize."³⁶ Bookspan advocates training students in analyzing and producing historical films and suggests that it is imperative for public historians to learn how to communicate beyond the written text, lest they "limit [their] own means of expression" and "[lose] influence over history."³⁷

The issue continues with the article "The (Un)Making of a Historical Drama: A Historian/Screenwriter Confronts Hollywood," where Daniel Blake Smith discusses the pitfalls of working with Hollywood as a historian. Although a useful cautionary tale, this article's bitterness and derision of the studio system as "Hollyweird" should be taken with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, Smith points out the danger of marginalization faced by historians who enter film production without adequate preparation. He points out that

³⁶ Shelley Bookspan, "History, Historians, and Visual Entertainment Media: Toward a Rapprochement," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 9–13. 10–12.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

Hollywood often sees the historian “as glorified fact-checker and truth police” more concerned with “buttons on the uniforms” than historical interpretation and story.³⁸ This view also ignores the valuable works of cinematic history produced by screenwriters who are not professional historians, especially works like *Conspiracy* and *Die Wannseekonferenz*.

In one of the more powerful articles in this issue of *The Public Historian*, the influential film historian Robert Rosenstone argues that historians should learn to “read” film and rather than simplifying history; “[f]ilms seem simple because on a surface level they are so easy to watch.”³⁹ Rosenstone is unsure of whether we can call historical films “History” but offers a compelling call for historical films to be included in the standard list of public history “areas”:

...the historical film can do “history” —that is, recount, explain, interpret, and make meaning out of the people and events in the past. Like written history, it utilizes traces of that past, but its rules of engagement with them are structured by the possibilities of the medium and the practices it has evolved. So its claims on us will inevitably be far different from those of written history.⁴⁰

Rosenstone concludes his essay by arguing that historians’ current skepticism and rejection of film is untenable in this century and that taking historical films seriously both as sources and as methods of interpreting the past can “expand the vocabulary with which we think and write history upon the page.”⁴¹

Robert Brent Toplin’s contribution to the issue, “Cinematic History: Where do We Go From Here?” argues that “cinematic artists...are becoming our most influential

³⁸ Daniel Blake Smith, “The (Un)Making of a Historical Drama: A Historian/Screenwriter Confronts Hollywood,” *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 27–44. 44.

³⁹ Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Reel Joan of Arc: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of the Historical Film,” *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 61–77. 70.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 72.

⁴¹ Ibid, 77.

historians.”⁴² Toplin discusses the advantages of the standard Hollywood historical movie over the avant-garde historical film, the latter of which is often championed by scholar like Rosenstone. For Toplin, the mass-market Hollywood film is what generates “lively debates about interpretation” and reaches a wide audience.⁴³ Toplin argues in favor of “fictionalizing,” one of the biggest qualms most historians have with film, by arguing that this is an essential aspect of filmmaking and can account for the “unknowable.”⁴⁴ For him, most criticisms of historical films found in the popular press are “irrelevant” because they demonstrate an ignorance of how film and Hollywood operate.⁴⁵ For Toplin, fictionalization is unavoidable and fictionalization, in and of itself, should not be criticized. Fictionalization in film should not be dismissed out of hand, but fictionalization can, and should be, criticized when it distorts history to a degree that it misleads the audience. *Conspiracy* mostly avoids these pitfalls, even if the dialogue is invented.⁴⁶

The most important aspect of Toplin’s article—and a guiding principle for this thesis—is his concept outlining the three levels of historical film analysis. The first level of analysis examines the finished film itself, including all things that film critics traditionally examine such as dialogue, cinematography, sound, and editing. The second level of analysis places the film in a historical context, which includes the film’s reception, biographies of the filmmakers, and other aspects. The third and final level of analysis is rarely undertaken. This level examines the production history of a specific film, scripts, studio memos, meeting minutes, promotional materials, interviews, and more.⁴⁷ This work engages with HBO’s

⁴² Robert Brent Toplin, “Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?,” *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 79–91. 91.

⁴³ Ibid, 83.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 89.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 88-89.

⁴⁶ See Chapter Two for an in-depth discussion of *Conspiracy*’s invented dialogue and “informed speculation.”

⁴⁷ Toplin, “Cinematic History.” 86-87.

Conspiracy at all three levels of analysis due to its grounding in production materials such as correspondence, memos, meeting minutes, and most importantly, scripts.

The final article in 2003's special issue of *The Public Historian* is Gerald Herman's "Creating the Twenty-First-Century 'Historian For All Seasons.'" Herman echoes Rosenstone's critique of historians by citing Simon Schama, who points out that historians are often only trained in textual analysis and thus err by thinking of "print as deep, images [as] shallow" and that "Don't know" is echoed by "don't need to know."⁴⁸ For Herman, this neglect of visual history and exclusive focus on textual analysis, especially that written for a dissertation committee as opposed to a wider audience, threatens historians because they will remain in "advisory or expert witness roles" for filmmakers instead of making films themselves. This would therefore damn historians to "minor supporting roles in the construction of popular understanding."⁴⁹

Taken together, the articles in *The Public Historian* illustrate that dramatic film can be a form of public history, that some public historians have done excellent work in advocating for it as such, and that the largest public history organization in existence, NCPH, took them seriously enough to devote an entire journal issue to the topic. Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin have written multiple books on the topic of history as film; they are some of the most prominent experts on the subject, and their contribution to *The Public Historian* shows that they do not see their work as somehow standing outside public history. Thus, this section sets the stage for my thesis, which argues that *Conspiracy* stands as an exemplary case study of a dramatic film as public history. This chapter will now further

⁴⁸ Simon Schama, "Television and the Trouble With History," BBC History Magazine 3, no. 7 (July 2002): 44., quoted in Gerald Herman, "Creating the Twenty-First-Century 'Historian For All Seasons,'" *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 93–102.

⁴⁹ Gerald Herman, "Creating the Twenty-First-Century 'Historian For All Seasons,'" *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 93–102. 102.

explore history and film beyond *The Public Historian*, particularly the difficulties encountered when portraying the Holocaust on film.

IV. History and Film

Historical dramas have been a major part of cinema since its beginnings at the turn of the twentieth century. Early Hollywood studios including Warner Brothers had entire departments devoted to historical research.⁵⁰ Cecil B. DeMille maintained a library devoted to research for historical films.⁵¹ In the United States, D.W. Griffith stands out as an early pioneer of historical film, most notably with his Lost Cause-infused *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In *Inside the Historical Film*, the historian and screenwriter Bruno Ramirez points out that the former-historian, then U.S. President, Woodrow Wilson's praise of *Birth of a Nation* "could also be taken as an informal validation of the new medium's power to 'write history'."⁵² Historical film also has its roots in cinematic traditions beyond Hollywood. Early German cinema was rife with historical subjects, especially in the films of Paul Wegener, Fritz Lang, and, most notably, Ernst Lubitsch. Other Weimar Republic-era films, while not obviously concerned with historical events, were nevertheless characterized by "interpretations of historical experience," particularly the trauma of the First World War in what Anton Kaes has dubbed "Shell Shock Cinema."⁵³ Ramirez rightly points out that "[i]n the country that had invented scientific history, these pioneering filmmakers did not need the approval of academic historians in their determination to search the past for their storytelling and in the

⁵⁰ Fred Andersen, "The Warner Bros. Research Department: Putting History to Work in the Classic Studio Era," *The Public Historian* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 1995): 51–69.

⁵¹ Bruno Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014). 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵³ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). 6.

process advance and refine film language.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Ramirez notes that the epic, feature-length historical film came into being at the same time that history professionalized, and he argues that this could have created a “sense of competition or rivalry” between filmmakers and historians.⁵⁵ This often-overlooked historical accident should not be ignored.

Professional historians have been responding to (and largely dismissing) filmmakers from the very beginning of both professions. It is no wonder historians, trained in the methods of Leopold Ranke (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), would be skeptical of the new, hyper-modern medium that Fritz Lang characterized as “the strongest instrument available for the mutual understanding of peoples” which “[had] an advantage over all other expressive forms: its freedom from space, time, and place.”⁵⁶ In some ways, this debate has never gone away: historians often seem bound by a text-centric conservatism and filmmakers often ignore basic historical facts and interpretations in favor of either profit margins or artistic statement, indicating a gulf between historical analysis and “historical imagination.”

Since the 1980s, several historians have pushed back against the historical discipline’s usual skepticism or dismissal of film. This group of historians includes the Americans Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin, who contributed to the film issue of *The Public Historian*, but also French scholars like Marc Ferro, who argued that film’s use of imagery was too ambiguous for historians.⁵⁷ Exploring the tension between the written text and all other mediums of expression is central to the works of historians that focus on film; some, including Toplin, have advocated a “history in images” to stand alongside traditional, text-based, history. Hayden White has advocated the term “historiophoty” to distinguish this

⁵⁴ Ramirez, 18-19.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁶ Fritz Lang, “The Future of the Feature Film in Germany,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁵⁷ Guynn, 8.

from historiography.⁵⁸ At this point, it is important to examine several of these works which are concerned with history on film.

Robert Rosenstone's *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* is a polemic that argues for dramatic film as a form of historical scholarship. One of the most prominent—and certainly most sanguine—scholars to explore film and history, Rosenstone, a historian who has worked as a historical consultant for films like *Reds*, argues for a radical shift in how historians treat film. He argues that “the very nature of the visual media forces us to reconceptualize and or broaden what we mean by the word, history.”⁵⁹ He also calls for “the historian to accept the mainstream historical film as a new kind of history...”⁶⁰

Rosenstone places film in the tradition of oral storytelling—as opposed to books—and sees a potential for film's visual language to “represent a major shift in consciousness about how we think about our past.”⁶¹ Clearly influenced by Walter Benjamin, especially his work “The Storyteller,” Rosenstone favors a fragmentary approach to his argument rather than a traditional narrative. Rosenstone's argument, which claims that film stands outside of, or beyond, the written tradition is questionable, especially when one considers historical films like *Conspiracy*, where the screenplay is the site of all historical research, argument, and representation. He fears that the rise of film may mean “history is dead in the way that God is dead” and that this will only further marginalize academic historians.⁶² Irrespective of their differences, all of the historians cited in this section agree on Rosenstone's latter point. The rise of dramatic historical films and their increasing power to shape public memory make it

⁵⁸ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007). 5.

⁵⁹ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998). 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 78.

⁶¹ Ibid, 14-15.

⁶² Ibid, 23-24.

imperative that historians take them seriously, whether by getting involved in production or taking them seriously as cultural artifacts with real power over audiences' views of history that should be examined critically.

Rosenstone points out historical films are not produced in a vacuum, being both influenced by and a comment on historiography. For him, historical films “cannot exist in a state of historical innocence” and are therefore, implicitly, part of the historiographical debate, whether the filmmakers explicitly declare so or not.⁶³ The third chapter will examine how *Conspiracy* and *Die Wannseekonferenz* refer to historiographical debates and how many of the differences between the two films can be explained by shifts in Holocaust historiography during the 1990s. Rosenstone argues dismissal of historical film implicitly agrees with Hollywood by ignoring non-blockbuster, independent, or foreign film, and thus boiling down film to an exclusively profit-driven enterprise. He points out the promises of avant garde film and argues that the rise of independent film (this book was originally published in 1995) makes historical films more possible today due to the end of the studio monopoly.⁶⁴ From a twenty-first century vantage point, one can see that this vision did not pan out, but as noted in Chapter Two, HBO and other cable networks have filled the artistic void previously-occupied by a robust independent film community. Rosenstone argues in favor of what he calls the “experimental history film,” which run against conventional historical films and can be characterized by emotional distance and skepticism of history as progress. This definition of the “experimental history film” certainly encompasses many Holocaust-themed films, including the two examined in this thesis. Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* is one of Rosenstone’s key examples of an experimental historical film that questions the idea of

⁶³ Ibid, 71-72.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 244.

progress.⁶⁵ *Visions of the Past* is a key work; Rosenstone is one of the most important scholars to explore history and film. Most other studies of this subject respond to him and he is a good conversation starter. Although one can largely agree with him and find his use of Benjamin inventive, he is sometimes too quick to dismiss text (where are the screenwriters in his vision?) and too sanguine about film's possibilities. Nevertheless, his discussion of the experimental film and film's untapped potential prove extremely valuable to this study, particularly when contrasted with Robert Brent Toplin, a proponent of the Hollywood version of history.

Robert Brent Toplin's *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* vehemently argues in favor of the Hollywood blockbuster over the avant-garde film championed by Rosenstone. Toplin uses the term "cinematic history" to distinguish the films he is interested in from documentaries, purely fictional films, or more experimental films set in the past. For him, "cinematic historians" interpret history, and their work cannot be overlooked or dismissed as shallow entertainment. He argues that academic historians need to take "cinematic histories" more seriously and is upset that they ignore "that technology and art created new kinds of historians in the twentieth century, people who have been competing effectively with traditional historians in presenting views of the past."⁶⁶ Toplin also points out that "the dialogue in a two-hour movie consumes no more than ten to twenty book-sized pages."⁶⁷ This limitation sounds very similar to those encountered by public historians working with exhibit text panels, websites, historic markers, and others. Film, just like other expressions of public history, has to condense history out of necessity, but in a different form.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 61-62.

⁶⁶ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002). 4-6.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 18.

Toplin's argument falters when he dismisses films that do not attract wide audiences, like Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil*. For Toplin, the Hollywood blockbuster that attracts millions is the superior form of cinematic history; "art films" like *Ride with the Devil* are less relevant due to their smaller audiences because they "abandon the conventions of Hollywood storytelling."⁶⁸ Toplin rightly points out that many historians' writings on film falter due to a failure on their part to read film theory and a tendency to look at each film individually, rather than as a part of a wider historical and cultural context. He also notes the inherently-constructed nature of both film and historical writing.⁶⁹ Toplin offers a rubric that identifies characteristics of cinematic history, but unlike his rubric mentioned earlier (three levels of film analysis), the one offered in *Reel History* is less useful. This model attempts to define cinematic history, but in many cases *Conspiracy* certainly does not fit this mold, especially when it comes to characteristics like heroes (in *Conspiracy*, there are none), "morally uplifting stories about struggles between Davids and Goliaths," the use of composite characters, etc.⁷⁰ These definitions sound like stereotypes of Hollywood films and thus betray the weaknesses of Toplin's strict definition of cinematic history, which almost exclusively applies to Hollywood blockbusters like *Titanic* or *Braveheart*, and excludes many films like *Conspiracy* that certainly do not fit into the concept of the "art film" that he derides. Perhaps the creative freedom afforded by cable television as opposed to the Hollywood studio system accounts for this difference.⁷¹

Most importantly for this study, Toplin argues that "cinema need to take audiences behind closed doors...to examine the silences between history sources" and that

⁶⁸ Ibid, 56-57, 164.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 160-161.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 16.

⁷¹ See Chapter Two for a discussion of cable television and artistic freedom.

“[i]nvention helps remedy this problem. The movie's fictional scenes offer **informed speculation**—educated guesses about how the ideas and behavior found expression in those unrecorded settings.”⁷² Informed speculation is a cornerstone of historical filmmaking and not unlike the work historians do when writing about events or people that have a scarce primary sources, especially historians that deal with histories of people who left behind no written records. It is important to remember that when writing history, a historian will always have to address gaps in the historical record. This is where informed speculation can be a useful tool for both historians and artists such as writers or filmmakers who deal with historical topics. Toplin’s use of the term “informed speculation” echoes *Conspiracy* writer Loring Mandel’s use of the same exact term in several interviews to describe how he wrote dialogue for characters in the film after researching their historical personalities and opinion on various subjects.⁷³ Despite its shortcomings and myopic focus on Hollywood, Toplin’s analysis proves very useful because he identifies filmmakers as “cinematic historians” that should be taken seriously, identifies key shortcomings in some historians’ dismissal of film, and advocates “informed speculation” when writing historical films.

Inside the Historical Film by Bruno Ramirez is, like Rosenstone’s *Visions of the Past*, an exploration of historical film from the view of a historian who has written multiple films. Ramirez strongly focuses on the screenwriter and the writing process as the most important aspect of historical filmmaking. For him, screenwriting is the key moment in film production where historical questions ranging from interpretation to accuracy are decided, it “constitutes a sort of bridge between research-generated historical knowledge and the visual language

⁷² Ibid, 201.

⁷³ Simone Gigliotti, “Commissioning Mass Murder: *Conspiracy* and History at the Wannsee Conference,” in *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television*, 1st edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 119–33. 125.

through which a film will speak to viewers.”⁷⁴ He addresses the rise of public history since the 1980s and labels it “one of the most significant developments,” using it as evidence for a counterargument to the skeptical historian who resists collaboration with “outsiders.” To him, the collaborative nature of public history in the form of museums, oral histories, documentaries, and websites is evidence of a sea change in historical production. Ramirez argues that “[professional historians] are the major producers of historical knowledge, but...are far from being the primary agents of transmuting that knowledge into historical culture.” The historical film is “the major vehicle” for this knowledge transmission. Ramirez acknowledges the danger of this, which is why he advocates the increased participation of professional historians in filmmaking.⁷⁵

Ramirez’s focus on screenwriting and collaboration are key to this particular study. The collaborative nature of filmmaking highlights its similarity to other forms of public history and his emphasis on screenwriting as the most important part of historical filmmaking bolsters available sources, the bulk of which consists of script drafts and comments on the various drafts for *Conspiracy*. In fact, the volume of archival material devoted to the *Conspiracy* scripts prompted the inclusion of an entire chapter for these sources. It is in the script material and commentary that one can find evidence for how *Conspiracy* was made, what its creators’ arguments were, what types of evidence they used, and how their script stands out among other historical films.

Anton Kaes’ *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* is also key to this study. For Kaes, film is a “technological memory bank” that “shapes” historical perspective. Kaes notes that as visual media only become more popular, the historian’s monopoly on

⁷⁴ Ramirez, 37.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 203-205.

history is in danger of being eclipsed: “History, it would seem, has become widely accessible, but the power over memory has passed into the hands of those who create these images.”⁷⁶ He sees films as “interventions in cultural or political life” due to their ability to offer complex perspectives that lend themselves to multiple interpretations.⁷⁷ He argues that people are dependent on film due to the impossibility of time travel and that the “technological memory bank” supersedes personal memory.

These film historians center the dramatic film as a powerful form of public history. Bruno Ramirez places filmmaking’s inherently collaborative nature squarely within the growing trend towards collaborative history. Robert Rosenstone echoes this sentiment and calls for public historians to directly engage with film:

The haphazard nature of history on film and the lack of professional control make it all the more necessary that historians who care about public history learn how to ‘read’ and ‘judge’ film, learn how to mediate between the historical world of the filmmaker and that of the historian.⁷⁸

Ultimately, this study draws from a variety of film historians and owes a huge debt to Rosenstone and Ramirez due to their explorations of the possibilities of historical films. While Toplin’s rubric outlining the three levels of historical film analysis has proven useful, his sole focus on Hollywood obscures the television landscape, especially on cable, the climate in which *Conspiracy* emerged.

Conspiracy is a Holocaust film, a particularly fraught category of historical film that comes with its own controversies and debates. Nevertheless, Holocaust films are a particularly important subcategory of historical films that prove valuable to public historians. The Holocaust, as one of the worst—and certainly the worst in the Western historical

⁷⁶ Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). ix.

⁷⁷ Ibid, x.

⁷⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 66.

imagination—crimes in history, provides particularly powerful historical drama in a way that other events do not. Holocaust films at their best make the crime immediate, unsettle audiences, and go beyond mere costume drama.

How do you explain the “unexplainable”? This is the central challenge for filmmakers depicting the Holocaust. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has argued that film’s range of expressive possibilities exceeds that of the written text, but cautions us about the dangers of misrepresentation and exploitation that can only be amplified by film, a more accessible medium.⁷⁹ Other survivors have suggested film as a means of communicating the experience of the Holocaust to future generations. In his memoir, *Literature or Life*, the Buchenwald survivor Jorge Semprún discussed the potential of film for communicating the experience of the camps to the rest of humanity. He recounts one survivor, a professor, discussing how to depict the Holocaust in art:

‘The cinema would seem to be the most appropriate art form,’ he adds. ‘But there certainly won’t be many film documents. And the most significant events of camp life have surely never been filmed.... In any case, the documentary has its limitations, insuperable ones.... A work of fiction, then—but who would dare? The best thing would be to produce a film right now, in the still visible truth of Buchenwald...with death still clearly present. Not a documentary, a work of fiction—I really mean that. It’s unthinkable....’⁸⁰

Others, most notably the French documentarian Claude Lanzmann, famous for *Shoah* (1985), have argued against the fictional representation of the Holocaust. Lanzmann’s most visible critique occurred in 1994, when he argued that *Schindler’s List* was beyond the pale due to “trivializing the Holocaust” and that portraying the Holocaust was a “betrayal.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Elie Wiesel, “Foreword,” in *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, Annette Insdorf and Elie Wiesel, 3 edition (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). xi.

⁸⁰ Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale, First Edition edition (New York: Viking Adult, 1997). 126-127.

⁸¹ Insdorf and Wiesel, *Indelible Shadows*. 259.

Many scholars and commentators associate Lanzmann with a “prohibition on representation” (*Darstellungsverbot*) that places all fictionalized (or re-created) filmic depictions of the Holocaust beyond the acceptable boundaries of taste, as doing so would harm the “uniqueness of the Holocaust.”⁸² Some critics have alleged that Lanzmann was engaging in self-promotion by arguing that *his* documentary style was the only acceptable method of portraying the Holocaust.⁸³ Most studies of the Holocaust and film tend to hold up Lanzmann as advocating an extreme position, vehemently rejecting any attempts at portraying the Holocaust dramatically. However, Lanzmann has recently amended his position, praising the Hungarian 2015 Auschwitz drama *Son of Saul*, as well as by collaborating with Steven Spielberg.⁸⁴ In critical literature, Lanzmann has often served as an avatar for one side of what film historian Catrin Corell has identified as a debate between “mimesis and prohibition of images” that has existed since the end of the Second World War.⁸⁵ This debate over film echoes Theodor Adorno’s oft-misquoted aphorism “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Historian Waltraud Wende has characterized both Wiesel and Lanzmann as embodying the “prohibition on representation” school of thought, which is odd considering that Wiesel contributed the foreword to Annette Insdorf’s *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*. Wende however has astutely pointed out that any sort of standard that bans the representation of the Holocaust on film is logically inconsistent unless one advocates banning the depiction of all sorts of historical periods including the American

⁸² Waltraud Wende, “Medienbilder und Geschichte - Zur Medialisierung des Holocaust,” in *Geschichte im Film: mediale Inszenierungen des Holocaust und kulturelles Gedächtnis; Dokumentation eines Symposiums, das am 29. und 30. November 2001 auf Einladung der Herausgeberin an der Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (NL) stattfand* (Metzler, 2002), 8–30. 12–13.

⁸³ Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*. 259.

⁸⁴ “‘Shoah’ Filmmaker Claude Lanzmann Talks Spielberg, ‘Son of Saul,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, accessed June 16, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/shoah-filmmaker-claude-lanzmann-talks-869931>.

⁸⁵ Catrin Corell, *Der Holocaust als Herausforderung für den Film: Formen des filmischen Umgangs mit der Shoah seit 1945: eine Wirkungstypologie* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009). 15.

West.⁸⁶ Other scholars have critiqued Holocaust film from the opposite stance. Aaron Kerner has argued against an “authenticity” fetish on the part of both filmmakers and historians. For Kerner, “authenticity is a red herring” due to the inherently constructed nature of film.⁸⁷

The debate is important because this is the context in which *Conspiracy* was produced. The film succeeds in examining the Holocaust from a detached point of view that avoids depicting physical violence in any form. In doing so, it evades this controversy by instead drawing attention to how the Holocaust unfolded—from the Nazi point of view. In this way, *Conspiracy* acts as “translator” of history, or an “intermediary between the past and present.”⁸⁸ The Holocaust film is very intertwined with the historical film, and it is, after all, a subgenre of historical film, one of the most powerful (and risky) types of historical films possible.

There is an imperative on the part of filmmakers and historians specializing in the Holocaust to make this difficult history accessible and understandable. In a 1994 article for *Die Zeit*, discussing *Schindler's List*, in which he called for “images instead of footnotes,” the German historian Wolfgang Benz powerfully articulated this imperative:

One cannot document the destruction of human beings through fear of death, the perpetrators' lust for murder, the moral ambivalence in a chaotic time and under existential threat. In order to make what happened comprehensible, the literary and dramatic form is needed.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Wende, “Medienbilder und Geschichte - Zur Medialisierung des Holocaust.” 12, 14.

⁸⁷ Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: Continuum, 2011). 15.

⁸⁸ Wende, “Medienbilder und Geschichte - Zur Medialisierung des Holocaust.” 9.

⁸⁹ Translation of “Die Zerstörung von Menschen durch Todesangst, die Mordlust der Täter, die Ambivalenzen der Moral in chaotischer Zeit und unter existentieller Bedrohung kann man nicht dokumentieren. Um begreiflich zu machen, was geschah, braucht es eben die literarische und dramatische Form.” in Wolfgang Benz, “Wie Authentisch Muß Der Bericht Über Ein Geschichtliches Ereignis Sein? Anmerkungen Eines Historikers Zu „Schindlers Liste“: Bilder Statt Fußnoten,” *Die Zeit*, March 4, 1994, sec. Kultur, <http://www.zeit.de/1994/10/bilder-statt-fussnoten>.

Similarly, Catrin Corell has argued that *Erfahrbarmachung*, or “experienceable-making” is the “central difficulty” of depicting the “unrepresentable” reality of the Holocaust. For her, film is the “central form of the memory of the Holocaust.”⁹⁰ Annette Insdorf echoes this sentiment—and the arguments of film historians like Robert Rosenstone and Anton Kaes—when she notes that Holocaust films are the primary means by which the public learns about the Holocaust; they make this historical event more accessible.⁹¹ It is important to restate here that none of these authors or filmmakers are naïve about the inherent problems associated with film as a commercial enterprise. All of the above-mentioned authors discuss financial concerns and take them seriously. For example, Aaron Kerner notes the difficulties in reconciling the need for commercial breaks in NBC’s miniseries *Holocaust* with the subject matter, but his argument falters with the claim that all of television is hampered by this intimate connection between production and corporate sponsorship.⁹² This outdated critique, or stereotype, of television is a common trope among scholars and critics who fundamentally ignore the cultural shift towards difficult, complex dramas on cable networks that rely on subscriptions instead of advertising.

Television has fundamentally changed the landscape of the historical film. Television is more accessible than theatrical film; its lower budgets also permit a wider range of possible productions, especially on networks like HBO that do not rely on advertising. The Second World War has been a staple since the early days of television. Dramatic or comedic series like ABC’s *Combat!* or CBS’ *Hogan’s Heroes*

⁹⁰ Corell, *Der Holocaust als Herausforderung für den Film*, 17.

⁹¹ Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, xvii.

⁹² Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 29.

were popular during the 1960s, and the 1970s saw groundbreaking documentaries like ITV's *The World at War* and serious dramas like NBC's *Holocaust*. The West German television landscape saw an upswing in both dramas and documentaries about the Second World War and the Holocaust during the 1980s. During this period, television "popularized the task of [coming to terms with the past]."⁹³ With the advent of high-quality cable dramas on HBO like *Oz* and *The Sopranos* during the 1990s, networks like HBO were able to sell difficult and complex dramas to large audiences. In other words, this new style of cable drama primed audiences for more "difficult" productions, including thought-provoking historical dramas.

This focus on accessibility and on making a complex and difficult history comprehensible for international publics that did not experience the Second World War firsthand places trends in Holocaust film directly in line with trends in the public history movement. Public history is similarly invested in making complex histories accessible to wide audiences. Both Anton Kaes and Annette Insdorf have borrowed a metaphor for film from film theorist Siegfried Kracauer. This metaphor sees film as Athena's polished shield in the face of Medusa: it allows you to see a "reflection" of pure horror without being destroyed by it (as one would by witnessing it firsthand).⁹⁴ Kracauer's view of the utility and possibility of film in the wake of the Holocaust is well-worth repeating for this study; it articulates Kracauer's reasoning for confronting the difficult and terrifying past on film. Furthermore, it serves as an important capstone on the discussion of the Holocaust, public history, and film:

⁹³ Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics After Auschwitz* (Athens, O.H.: Ohio University Press, 2006). 111.

⁹⁴ Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, xvii.

The mirror reflections of horror are an end in themselves. As such they beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to be beheld in reality. In experiencing the rows of calves' heads or the litter of tortured human bodies in the films made of the Nazi concentration camps, we redeem horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination. And this experience is liberating in as much as it removes a most powerful taboo. Perhaps Perseus' greatest achievement was not to cut off Medusa's head but to overcome his fears and look at its reflection in the shield. And was it not precisely this feat which permitted him to behead the monster?⁹⁵

In light of high-quality television productions like *Conspiracy*, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, and many more, it is perhaps time to reapply Kracauer's quote to this era: Perseus' shield is no longer a cinematic canvas. It is a television screen.

The next chapter will analyze the production process of HBO's *Conspiracy* based on a close reading of multiple script drafts, correspondence, interviews, meeting minutes, and HBO memoranda. The bulk of this material is part of the Loring Mandel Collection, located in the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research in Madison, Wisconsin. Loring Mandel is a prolific screenwriter who wrote the screenplay and conducted research for *Conspiracy*. This material will allow analysis of the film on all three levels of historical film analysis as introduced by Robert Toplin in his article "Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?" Furthermore, this focus on the Loring Mandel archive and the *Conspiracy* screenplays will further Bruno Ramirez's argument for the screenplay and screenwriting process as the most important step in creating historical films. It is through the script archive that one can see how *Conspiracy* was conceived, what sorts of arguments it referred and responded to, what the source base was, and how the film serves as an example of "doing history" in a way that largely—no film, book, or exhibit is flawless—fulfills the goals of public history.

⁹⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). 306.

The final chapter will examine the older German-Austrian film *Die Wannseekonferenz*, and then compare and contrast it with *Conspiracy* while critiquing both based on their historical arguments, portrayals of key figures, and responses to historiography. It will also continue the analysis of *Conspiracy* begun in Chapter Two. This chapter will also explore how historians have responded to—or ignored—both films.

We have to watch out for overkill; the most interesting thing about the whole conference is the dispassionate rationality of it all.⁹⁶

Chapter Two: *Conspiracy's* Production Process and Public History

A maid opens the curtains and lets in the sunlight as a mob of servants unrolls carpets and sets tables, while cooks prepare a gourmet breakfast. A calligrapher meticulously completes table cards for a conference's seating arrangements. The scene unfolds in a charming villa on the snow-covered shore of Wannsee, a large lake west of Berlin. SS Lt. Colonel Adolf Eichmann oversees the activity as mid-level members of the SS and Third Reich's civil service begin arriving. As the men arrive, cliques begin to form. The SS stick to themselves while civil servants nervously ponder the reasons for this meeting—and the large SS presence. After a few minutes of chatting, networking, and sizing up the other men in the room, SS General Reinhard Heydrich arrives and calls the meeting to order.

Heydrich has called the meeting to discuss coordinating efforts among the Reich's disparate government agencies to ensure a speedy implementation of the so-called Final Solution to the Jewish Question in Europe—or what will later be known as the Holocaust. A board meeting unfolds in real time, but instead of discussing stocks or shareholders, these men discuss mass murder. First, they dance around the subject at hand by using euphemisms like “resettlement,” “labor columns,” and “evacuation.” As the meeting unfolds, inhibitions loosen due to cognac and wine; Heydrich's insistence on the supremacy of the SS becomes apparent; and the men begin to speak quite openly about murdering the entire Jewish population of Europe. Heydrich uses a mixture of charm and intimidation to quell dissenting voices of men who are not opposed to genocide per se, but rather its chosen

⁹⁶ Loring Mandel and Frank Pierson, “Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft” December 18, 1996, Box 2, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 33-34.

implementation. Throughout the meeting, Eichmann manages the stenotypist and serves as Heydrich's right-hand man. At the end of the film, Eichmann, Heydrich, and Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller retire to the study for drinks and discuss the day's successful meeting. The men are relieved, happy that they managed to organize murder on an industrial scale without major resistance. Heydrich has solidified his personal power and that of the SS; now the stage is set for Auschwitz.

Conspiracy (2001) is an unusual historical film because it places the viewer in the middle of one of the most infamous meetings in history and does so in real time. The Nazis depicted in the film are terrifying not because they embody stereotypes (with the exception of a few minor characters), but because they come across as "normal" human beings: they are ambitious, vain, profane, prone to vices, and insecure. Unlike most dramas depicting the Third Reich, the actors speak English with their native British or American accents instead of exaggerated German ones. The camera remains at eye level, which further increases the viewer's feeling of participating in the meeting. The film is devoid of an uplifting message or happy ending; it ends on an unsettling note as Eichmann drives away from the villa with the stenotypist's minutes. Title cards before the credits explain the fate of each participant, but many ended up with rather cushy existences postwar after slaps on the wrist by the Allied authorities or the West German government.

The following chapter will discuss *Conspiracy*'s development, the writing process, and how it serves as an excellent example of public history on film. At each step of the production, screenwriter Loring Mandel conducted extensive historical research, professional historians commented on the scripts and offered suggestions for improvement, and a full-time research assistant refined the script. In this chapter, I argue that *Conspiracy* is much more than a dramatic film for entertainment purposes. It is a work of public history

that engages with, alludes to, and comments on historiography; the film has its own historiographical argument. In this way, *Conspiracy* is an excellent example of the potential dramatic film holds as a medium for public history.

I. Origins of *Conspiracy*

The origins of *Conspiracy* stem from a desire to remake the 1984 Austrian & West German film *Die Wannseekonferenz*. The director/screenwriter Frank Pierson, famous for dramas like *Cool Hand Luke*, watched *Die Wannseekonferenz* in 1995 and was profoundly affected. For Pierson, the story of the meeting at Wannsee “didn’t move him to tears, but moved him to anger,” and recreating this event quickly became a passion project.⁹⁷ That same year, Pierson met with HBO executives Bob Cooper and Michael Fuchs, who agreed to produce an English-language version for “a new generation.” At this time, the project was simply titled *Wannsee*.⁹⁸ According to Loring Mandel, Pierson approached him after viewing *Die Wannseekonferenz* and asked him to draft a screenplay for HBO. HBO—a network that had previously collaborated with Pierson on historical films like *Truman* and *Citizen Cohn*—was involved from the beginning; Pierson and Mandel helmed the project as director and screenwriter, respectively.⁹⁹ Mandel and Pierson had worked together on *Citizen Cohn*, an HBO movie about the McCarthy era. Shortly after signing on to *Wannsee*, Mandel and Pierson became attached to *Complicity*, another historical drama set in WWII. *Complicity* was a pet project of Colin Callender, then head of HBO NYC Productions, which managed the

⁹⁷Alexander Tang, “A Conversation with Loring Mandel,” *The Harvard Crimson*. November 12, 2013, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/11/12/interview-loringmandel/>.

⁹⁸ Frank Pierson, “Frank Pierson to Stanley Scheinbaum,” September 30, 1998, Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

⁹⁹ Tang, “A Conversation with Loring Mandel.”

Wannsee project. *Complicity* explored Allied indifference towards the fate of European Jewry even in the face of overwhelming evidence of the Third Reich's atrocities in the East.

Callender decided to combine the two projects into companion films.¹⁰⁰

Conspiracy was part of a larger development within American television during the mid-1990s and early 2000s: the rise of the complicated and adult-oriented premium cable drama. Home Box Office (HBO) led the way in this development with influential dramatic series, especially *Oz* and *The Sopranos*, which brought the techniques—and talent—of the American independent film scene to the living room, as Hollywood studios returned to a blockbuster-centric outlook. HBO's small, subscriber-based revenue model freed filmmakers from the restrictions of broadcast networks, which depended on advertising and large audience numbers, and helped foster a climate of creative freedom and experimentation.¹⁰¹ As film and television critic Alan Sepinwall has noted, the 1990s and early 2000s were a time when "If you wanted thoughtful drama for adults, you didn't go to the multiplex; you went to your living room couch."¹⁰² Television, in general, during this period was also characterized by an increasing number of feature films that were virtually indistinguishable from theatrical releases in terms of production quality.¹⁰³ HBO further invested in original film by forming HBO NYC Productions, a company whose goal was to "[produce] 'edgier and more diverse'" programming.¹⁰⁴ HBO NYC Productions produced *Conspiracy* and *Complicity* during the early stages of the writing process and continued to do so until it eventually merged with HBO Films.

¹⁰⁰ Pierson, "Frank Pierson to Stanley Scheinbaum," 1.

¹⁰¹ Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013). 7-9.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰³ Michael Paris, *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television*, 1st edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). 8.

¹⁰⁴ Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013). 43.

HBO Films made a name for itself by producing quality original programming that simultaneously embodied and subverted established genres; it actively sought to be the “auteur studio of the nineties.”¹⁰⁵ HBO Films sought to “make us nervous” with “fearless” and “provocative” programming by examining controversial issues that traditional broadcast networks actively avoided. According to *The Essential HBO Reader*, a scholarly examination of HBO’s history, HBO’s “most notable” productions “negotiate the past and interrogate cultural memory through the depiction of individual lives that are positioned at the center of national struggles, community conflicts, social movements, and scandals.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, these productions usually avoid the clichéd uplifting moral lessons and happy endings common to programming on other networks.¹⁰⁷ Instead, HBO’s historical productions often use history to impart “lessons” to the audience.¹⁰⁸ *Conspiracy* certainly fits this description, and it is a typical example of HBO’s output during the turn of the millennium. Additionally, *Conspiracy* was one of a wave of television and film productions during this period produced with the fiftieth anniversary of World War II in mind, including HBO’s miniseries *Band of Brothers*, which also aired in 2001.

Indeed, HBO’s different attitude towards filmmaking was not lost on Loring Mandel, writer of *Conspiracy*, who as early as 1979 had argued against what he saw as a broadcast network system that straightjacketed writers into creating bland, uncontroversial, programming that had to deliver positive messages.¹⁰⁹ In 2004, Mandel referenced his

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 44-45.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 46.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 46.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 50.

¹⁰⁹ Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and Lee Margulies, *Docu-Drama Symposium 1979*. (Hollywood, Calif.: ATAS, 1979). 29.

recently acclaimed work, including *Conspiracy*, and credited his success to cable networks like HBO:

The Television work that I've done in the past 10 or 15 years has been on cable, where you have an enormous amount of freedom and the people who are making the decisions come from theater rather than the advertising agencies or law staff or standards and practices.¹¹⁰

Although Mandel sang the praises of cable networks like HBO in this interview, he has tempered his enthusiasm when discussing an unproduced companion film about the Allied failure to aid Jewish refugees, *Complicity*.¹¹¹ The story of the *Complicity* script's evolution, and eventual abandonment, by HBO serves as an important caveat to HBO's seemingly daring and "edgy" attitude towards historical filmmaking. *Complicity*'s fate illustrates the dangers even well-researched historical productions face when they touch on sensitive political subjects or unearth an unpalatable past. Although *Conspiracy* explores a difficult past, it is far removed from American politics and very clearly engages with the Third Reich, which has, of course, been a standard (e.g., uncontroversial) movie villain since the war. As we shall see, in the late 1990s and early 2000s even more experimental networks like HBO still considered some topics too edgy for their brand. In the case of *Complicity*, its damning portrayal of the Churchill and, more importantly, Roosevelt administrations ultimately doomed the project.

After the *Conspiracy* project launched in 1996, Loring Mandel quickly began research for his script. His research included trips to the Leo Baeck Institute, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and the Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz.¹¹² During this time, Mandel became attached to Pierson's unproduced drama *Complicity*, which at the time had a script penned by British

¹¹⁰ Dexter H. Kim, "Paddy Chayefsky Laurel Award for Television: Loring Mandel," *Written By*, 2004.

¹¹¹ Loring Mandel, Interview by Stephen Bowie. "Loring Mandel", Video, June 15, 2010, Archive of American Television, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/loring-mandel>.

¹¹² Ibid.

writer David Edgar. After it became clear that HBO wanted to produce both films and tie them together, Mandel chose the title *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee* in an effort to emphasize his Wannsee project as a companion piece to the already-titled *Complicity*.¹¹³ HBO and Pierson were very impressed with Mandel's first draft, which he delivered to them in November 1996. Due to the quality of Mandel's script, HBO and Pierson put him in charge of *Complicity*. He reworked David Edgar's material and eventually delivered a draft script for *Complicity* in June 1997. This draft explicitly ties the two films together by opening as Eichmann drives away from the villa at Wannsee.¹¹⁴ This draft was well-received and HBO began plans to consolidate the two films into a single three-hour epic.¹¹⁵

When exploring the Loring Mandel Papers at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, it quickly became apparent that the project suddenly became a massive undertaking; this 1997 draft of *Complicity* spurred HBO and Pierson to retool the project into a three-hour film. Initial drafts simply called for a double-feature, *Conspiracy* would be recapped at the beginning of *Complicity* via various methods, usually flashback, narration, or simply repeating the last scene from *Conspiracy* (which changed a great deal, for example some drafts end *Conspiracy* with Reinhard Heydrich's assassination in May 1942). Mandel delivered several drafts of both films simultaneously throughout 1997. This transitioned into combined scripts after the films were merged into a three-hour film. *Conspiracy* roughly adheres to the original 1996 draft, but *Complicity*, a much more ambitious project, was clearly

¹¹³ Loring Mandel, "Loring Mandel to Frank Pierson," 1996, Box 11, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁴ Loring Mandel, "Complicity, written by Loring Mandel, with Notes & Appendix," June 7, 1997, Box 3, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹¹⁵ "Notes on HBO Meeting, 10/1/97," October 1, 1997, Box 15, Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

constantly rewritten during 1997 and 1998. Ultimately, there were six total drafts of a combined *Conspiracy/Complicity* script.

At this point, *Complicity* was wildly ambitious in scope. While *Conspiracy* centers on the ninety-minute Wannsee Conference, *Complicity* takes a much wider view: telling the story of the weak Allied response to the Holocaust and America's rejection of Jewish refugees. Part of *Complicity* portrays the 1943 Bermuda Conference, where American and British officials discussed the Jewish refugee crisis and how their respective governments would respond. However, *Complicity* focuses on the Bermuda Conference only for a short period of time; this is not another reenactment of bureaucrats sitting around a table discussing the fate of millions. There are many scenes in Washington and London, in various extermination camps and deportation centers, the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, and, in an effort to tie the project in with *Conspiracy*, many scenes depicting Eichmann organizing deportations of Jews to Auschwitz. Gerhart Riegner, secretary of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, is the central figure of *Complicity* (Mandel and Pierson also conducted extensive interviews with the real-life Riegner). He narrates the film and his efforts to warn the Allies about the Holocaust form a major part of the plot. Riegner, acting on information obtained from an important German industrialist, had notified the American government about mass extermination as early as August 1942.¹¹⁶ The combined *Conspiracy/Complicity* scripts use the end of the Wannsee Conference and Heydrich's death as the bridge between the two films.¹¹⁷ Due to the unmanageable and, frankly, impossible nature of the *Complicity* script—along with

¹¹⁶ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*, (New York: Pantheon, 1984). 42-43

¹¹⁷ Loring Mandel, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee" and "Complicity" July 20, 1997, Box 3, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 117-118.

controversy over the film's portrayal of the Roosevelt administration—HBO withdrew its support for both films in September 1998.¹¹⁸

Complicity is strongly grounded in research material, particularly primary source investigation in the National Archives. Most of these files are photocopies of State Department memoranda, meeting minutes from the Bermuda Conference, newspaper clippings, and others. The most influential secondary source is David S. Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*.¹¹⁹ Wyman's is the most-cited work in the script and is referenced often in correspondence. Andrea Axelrod was the primary researcher for both *Conspiracy* and *Complicity*; her input will be further examined as we discuss the evolution of *Conspiracy*'s historical argument.

There are no documents available that explicitly discuss why HBO eventually produced *Conspiracy*. However, a September 1998 fax that Frank Pierson sent to Los Angeles-based human rights activist Stanley K. Scheinbaum lays out both the financial and, more importantly, political reasons HBO gave for withdrawing its support for the dual-film project. Pierson's connection with Scheinbaum is telling, as the films both have activist messages compared to most historical films, although *Complicity* is much more explicit because it argues that America is complicit in the Holocaust due to turning away Jewish refugees. For Pierson, HBO's backing out signified that they had "lost their nerve" and called its status as a television pioneer into question.¹²⁰ After three years of work on the project, Pierson was incensed by HBO's decision. In one paragraph, he articulates a vision of history not at all dissimilar from that of a public historian:

...I am saddened and angered by the reasons for [the cancellation] happening. The historical record needs to be read; it is not enough for a few

¹¹⁸ Pierson, "Frank Pierson to Stanley Scheinbaum," 2.

¹¹⁹ Mandel, "Complicity." i-iv.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 1.

scholars to know and understand—if history is not recreated for each generation it might as well be forgotten and its lessons left unlearned.¹²¹

With this statement, Pierson hits upon an integral aspect of public history. No matter how varied definitions of public history can be, it is safe to say that all agree history should be disseminated to audiences wider than a dissertation committee or other specialists. An HBO production reaches an audience of *millions*; it goes without saying that this is an extremely large audience compared to “traditional” works of history. Although filmmakers do not usually consider themselves historians, in this case, the amount of historical research and debate that went into *Conspiracy* and *Complicity* shows that these are works of history by any reasonable public historian’s measure. There is little consequential difference between the types of sources or research techniques that the production team used than those any historian would use when creating an exhibit or writing a book. The desired end product and audience are the key differences.

Pierson describes the “extraordinarily difficult” writing and rewriting process for *Complicity*—for him, Wannsee “lent itself to dramatization” compared to *Complicity*’s complicated portrayal of Allied indifference to the Holocaust. Pierson discussed financial reasons for HBO’s decision—three years of “enormous” amounts of money had been invested in a complicated and ambitious project that seemed impossible to film. Furthermore, partner networks including the BBC and Germany’s UFA, held various rights to the project due to plans to utilize various overseas production facilities during filming. HBO also went through a regime change during this period; new management had different ideas about the network’s future than the executives who had originally backed the project. For HBO’s new management, *Complicity*’s portrayal of the Roosevelt administration in

¹²¹ Ibid, 2.

particular constituted sufficient grounds to terminate the project. Pierson felt that these executives were “uncomfortable with the idea of depicting our wartime leaders as in any way complicit” and “particularly disturbed” by the depiction of members of Roosevelt’s cabinet, including Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, as anti-Semites.¹²² The controversy over *Complicity* and its portrayal of American leaders as complicit anti-Semites was a bridge too far even for HBO during this period; this, rather than the expense of the project, seems a more likely reason for HBO passing on the project, particularly when one examines the brief revival—and second cancellation—of the *Complicity* project after *Conspiracy*’s enormous success in terms of viewership, awards, and critical acclaim.

The archival record on what transpired between the project’s cancellation and its resurgence is sparse. Pierson’s September 1998 fax also outlines his strategy to get HBO to renew its support for *Conspiracy*, which apparently worked; production was back on track by early 2000. Pierson argued that *Conspiracy*, which mostly takes place inside one room, was much easier—and cheaper—to film than *Complicity* and that it avoided the political controversy which had made HBO skittish.¹²³ This reasoning, along with the fact that the final version of *Conspiracy* largely retains both the structure and dialogue of early script drafts, likely led HBO to relent and back *Conspiracy* in 1999.

II. Writing Conspiracy

In November 1996, Mandel finished his first draft of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*. This early draft does differ from the final film, but not overly so; most of the dialogue remains the same. The beginning and end sections of the film transform the most

¹²² Ibid, 2.

¹²³ Ibid, 2.

over the course of the script's evolution. Nevertheless, a few subplots and characterizations either transform or disappear from later versions of the script, most notably an odd subplot involving Under State Secretary of the Foreign Ministry Martin Luther's dog. However, the portrayals of characters including Heydrich and Eichmann are the most striking differences between the film and early script drafts. These differences in character portrayals may appear minor at first, but they have a big impact on the final film. In a film like *Conspiracy*, which is mostly character and dialogue-driven (it is mainly a group of men sitting around a table, not a standard setting for a historical film), details of characters' personalities and their statements on ideology and policy are important to both the film's dramatic and historical imperatives.

The changes in Heydrich's characterization are the most pronounced in the scripts. The original script begins with a scene of Heydrich flying low over Berlin in his small aircraft, smiling as he looks over the Wannsee villa, as if he is a prince looking over his domain.¹²⁴ Although the completed film emphasizes Heydrich's daredevil personality and love of fast cars and airplanes, the original script devotes even more time to it. Heydrich is also more humorous (as in *Die Wannseekonferenz*) in the early drafts of Mandel's scripts, which also nod to his historic reputation for womanizing. Heydrich's wife suspected him of infidelity and the rumor of his love for Berlin brothels followed him throughout the 1930s and 1940s.¹²⁵ Additionally, Heydrich's career as an officer in the *Reichsmarine* (Weimar Republic-era navy) was abruptly cut short due to a sex scandal and subsequent court martial.¹²⁶ This may also be a nod to Dietrich Mattausch's portrayal of Heydrich in *Die*

¹²⁴ Loring Mandel, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft" November 14, 1996, Box 3, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹²⁵ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*. 112-113.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 43-44.

Wannseekonferenz, which we will return to later. Examples of Heydrich's womanizing reputation include a scene of Heydrich openly flirting with a telephone operator and then chiding her for accepting calls while he is busy.¹²⁷ In the final version of the film, this scene is changed to show Eichmann scold a male telephone operator for interrupting the meeting. Furthermore, Gerhard Klopfer comments directly on Heydrich's womanizing at several points in this draft. Klopfer also gives voice to rumors about Heydrich having Jewish relatives in both this draft and the final film, but the early drafts go even further in depicting Klopfer as a petty, backbiting Party representative. Portrayed as an obese, red-faced martinet in the film, the Klopfer in the first draft is even more of a pig. In one scene, he harasses the previously-mentioned telephone operator:

KLOPFER

Get into bed with that powerful man, huh? What an adventure.

Blushing, she lowers her head.

KLOPFER

Of course he's married, would that matter?¹²⁸

Appropriately, Klopfer is described as "conscienceless, crude, a bully and a braggart" in the script's opening material.¹²⁹ This description, however, does not exactly square with the historical Klopfer. The differences in the portrayals of Heydrich are important because his character becomes more subtle and his growing status as a major figure in the Third Reich government becomes more apparent. The womanizing, daredevil Heydrich of earlier script drafts may be grounded in historical reality, but they veer too close to other portrayals of Heydrich, distracting from the film's main point regarding him: the meeting at Wannsee was above all a show of power for Heydrich. The final film does reference Heydrich's

¹²⁷ Mandel, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft." 26-27.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 51.

¹²⁹ Ibid, ii.

penchant for fast airplanes and adultery, but it places much less emphasis on it than in the earlier script.

The Adolf Eichmann of Mandel's first draft also differs from the final filmed version, but in ways less obvious than Heydrich. In the early drafts, Eichmann is more explicitly described as a humorless, and somewhat obtuse, bureaucrat that fits a bit more into the "banality of evil" stereotype popularized by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Nevertheless, this Eichmann is still far removed from Arendt's description of him as a glorified secretary who held little importance at the meeting.¹³⁰ Indeed, Mandel's preface to the first draft openly references Arendt's thesis:

Heydrich's use of Eichmann as a glorified flunky gave Eichmann the opportunity to involve himself in every detail of the program, and left him in a perfect position to become the prime mover once Heydrich was assassinated.¹³¹

Rather than a "nonentity," Mandel's Eichmann is calculating and uses his relatively low rank as a cover to increase his own power while remaining in the background. All script drafts and the final film include short scenes of higher-ranking conference attendees dismissing or ignoring Eichmann, something the filmmakers want the audience to notice. A cover sheet attached to the first script draft describes a first and third act that, while not filmed, further illustrate the filmmakers' early desire to focus on the rise of Eichmann in the machinery of the Holocaust. HBO originally wanted to depict Heydrich's assassination on 27 June 1942 at the hands of Czech commandos. This action sequence was to culminate in a scene of Eichmann learning about the attack while bowling, where, according to the note, he "[remarks] that [the assassination] shows that history is more than personality, that the work

¹³⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: 113-114.

¹³¹ Mandel, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft." i.

would be done. And became the relentless soul of the Holocaust.”¹³² For the filmmakers, a main story thread of *Conspiracy* (and earlier versions of *Complicity*) was about a transfer of power and control over the Holocaust from Heydrich to Eichmann, which was only made possible by Heydrich’s assassination. In a sense, they portray Eichmann as Heydrich’s unlikely heir apparent who arrived at that position through cunning, calculation, and initiative.

The first draft of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee* shows that Mandel spent a large amount of time researching material related to the Wannsee Conference and its participants. The Wannsee Protocol itself is the most important source Mandel consulted, and a few lines of dialogue illustrate that. However, it is important to remember that the Protocol is not a verbatim transcript of the meeting, but a heavily edited summary that depends on bureaucratic euphemisms and evasions in order to get its true meaning across. No bureaucrat would actually *speak* like the Protocol. Although the bibliography itself is sparse, the script contains forty-seven footnotes; no small number when one realizes that screenplays are much smaller in both page length and word count compared to a book, with the overwhelming majority of text devoted to dialogue. This is also unusual when one considers that the vast majority of film scripts do not contain footnotes. The limited amount of space for exposition is not too dissimilar from the limited space requirements encountered when writing exhibit text or other public history projects. Most of the footnotes provide context to particular statements made by conference participants or serve to provide evidence for opinions held by certain participants that were not recorded in the Wannsee protocol itself. Mandel has referred to this process of including participants’ historical

¹³² Ibid, Cover Page.

opinions in invented dialogue as “informed speculation.”¹³³ The historian Simone Gigliotti has written at length on Mandel’s use of “informed speculation” as a way to fill in gaps in the narrative that is “not entirely dissimilar from historians investigating Wannsee.”¹³⁴ For her, this technique “gives angry, frustrated and impassioned voices” to the sober, matter-of-fact Wannsee Protocol and creates Mandel’s own version of the Wannsee Conference.¹³⁵ Mandel’s “informed speculation” is largely successful, but not without its problems, as the following example of a minor character illustrates.

Mandel’s characterization of the State Secretary¹³⁶ representing the Ministry of Justice, Roland Freisler, as rabidly anti-Russian provides us with one example of Mandel’s “informed speculation.” Freisler, a notorious judge who gained infamy due to his ruthless sentences and tirades as President of the *Volksgerichtshof*, or People’s Court, speaks little in the film.¹³⁷ One of his few scenes includes this racist statement about Russians:

Oh my friend, the Russian isn’t a communist. The Russian doesn’t care who runs things, I’ve lived amongst ‘em; the Russian only cares he has a bottle of vodka to suck and some form of domestic animal life to fuck and he’ll happily sit in shit his whole life. That’s his politics. I know those people...¹³⁸

Although no statement like this is present in the Wannsee Protocol, this extreme bit of dialogue illustrates several aspects of Mandel’s “informed speculation.” Mandel footnotes this line and gives an explanation along with a citation to Robert S. Wistrich’s *Who’s Who in Nazi Germany*, an encyclopedia of Nazi personalities: “Freisler’s background...gave him a

¹³³ Gigliotti, “Commissioning Mass Murder.” 125.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 127.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 126.

¹³⁶ *Staatssekretär*. For a description of the Staatssekretär, see Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting*. 57.

¹³⁷ For a comprehensive account of Freisler’s tenure as President of the *Volksgerichtshof*, see Helmut Ortner, *Der Hinrichter: Roland Freisler - Mörder im Dienste Hitlers* (Frankfurt am Main: Nomen Verlag, 2014).

¹³⁸ Mandel, “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft.” 83.

particularly bitter anti-Russian Bias”¹³⁹ This is somewhat contradicted by the brief character description of Freisler at the beginning of the script, which states that he was “more anti-Communist than anti-Russian.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Freisler had spent many years in Russia and spoke Russian fluently after his time as a POW and subsequent tenure as a Bolshevik.¹⁴¹ His rabid-anti-Russian stance in the film fits with his political transformation into a hardline anti-communist and later tenure as the most powerful judge in the Third Reich. Freisler would have wanted to overcompensate for his past as a Leninist and active participant in the Russian Revolution. More importantly, the profanity-laced excerpt illustrates Freisler’s propensity for public tirades and tongue-lashings that he liberally inflicted upon defendants in the People’s Court during show trials, especially those accused of treason, sabotage, or any number of acts that the regime deemed subversive. Freisler was a very prominent public figure during the Third Reich; the regime celebrated him by showing his “fiendish, raucous” courtroom tirades against “traitors” in newsreels.¹⁴² In one notorious case, he publicly called a defendant a “shabby rascal” who “shattered under [the weight of] his own disgrace,” which although quaint to our modern ears, was quite insulting during early twentieth-century Germany, especially coming from a government official.¹⁴³ Freisler was an enormously intimidating figure during the Third Reich and his notorious, boorish tirades form key scenes in Hans Fallada’s *Every Man Dies Alone*, a 1947 novel depicting an ill-fated resistance cell. In the case of Freisler, Mandel’s “informed speculation” gets across a lot of information about this historical figure in three lines of dialogue. In addition to just imparting fact to the

¹³⁹ Ibid, Appendix 3, note 40.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, ii.

¹⁴¹ Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003). 172.

¹⁴² Steven Lehrer, *Wannsee House and the Holocaust* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2000). 159.

¹⁴³ Translation of “Sie sind ja ein schäbiger Lump! Zerschlagen Sie unter der Gemeinheit?” quoted in Hans Royce, Erich Zimmermann, and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *20. Juli 1944*, 4. Aufl. (Bonn: Berto-Verlag, 1961). 206.

audience, e.g. Freisler spent time in Russia, the offensive nature of the dialogue also provides us with a window into the historical figure's chauvinistic and brash personality. While the first draft contains many instances of "informed speculation" and points to specific research conducted by Mandel, more rigorous historical research was yet to come; this took place after HBO agreed to produce *Conspiracy* after previously cancelling both it and *Complicity*.

III. *Conspiracy* as a work of public history

Once HBO recommitted itself to the *Conspiracy* project, it also dedicated itself to engaging with the historiography of the Wannsee Conference and the Holocaust, which illustrates how a dramatic film can use historical research and argument in the same vein as other "channels" of public history. *Conspiracy* provides an excellent case study not only due to the extensive documentation surrounding its production, but because of how it responds to the challenges unique to portraying the Holocaust on film. It "translates" and interprets a complicated history for a wide audience in a way that goes further than most other historical films. The dramatic film can explore historical issues at a level of visual and emotional depth that is difficult for most other public history projects to reach. Furthermore, the potential audience for dramatic films vastly outsizes that of other public history projects. If communicating history—in an accessible manner grounded in historical research—to the large, amorphous "public" is the primary goal of public history, dramatic films like *Conspiracy* fulfill that purpose. They do not replace historical monographs, but they certainly complement them and may lead curious audiences to historical literature after viewing a film.

In April 2000, Mandel re-submitted his second draft of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee* to HBO. By this time, HBO had agreed to produce *Conspiracy* and had relegated *Complicity* to the back burner. This version of the script is mostly unchanged from the first

draft; it is the version most commented-on by historians serving as consultants, HBO executives, and others involved with the production, but it is important to keep in mind that the producers and various historians provided extensive comments on the scripts from the beginning of the project. The earliest comments on this script (as evidenced by the archive) indicate that the production team was well-aware of potential shortcomings of the film and sought to make a particular historiographical argument. One version of this script, which contains comments in red from an unknown author (presumably Frank Pierson), contains several passages that indicate the production team's intent. One passage emphasizes the need to avoid caricatures of Nazis that could push the film into B-movie camp:

“...we have to avoid demonizing these people who are so damned by their very presence [at Wannsee]... We have to watch out for overkill; the most interesting thing about the whole conference is the dispassionate rationality of it all.”¹⁴⁴

The second point regarding the “dispassionate rationality” of the conference being its most interesting feature is a theme that the production team hit on repeatedly during the writing process. *Conspiracy* is not a standard WWII or Holocaust film; no one is killed on screen, no action (outside of Heydrich's assassination, which was ultimately cut from the script) takes place. One of the main hurdles the filmmakers had to overcome was how to make a ninety-minute meeting capture and hold an audience's attention. For Pierson, one of the goals was to dramatize Arendt's banality of evil concept itself.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, the image of the Nazi as the quintessential “desk murderer” is a trope that the filmmakers were keenly aware of, utilized, and responded to in the film, with Stanley Tucci's portrayal of Adolf Eichmann being the most notable and important example. An early comment from Pierson on Eichmann's character argued that Eichmann should fool the audience into underestimating

¹⁴⁴ Mandel and Pierson, “Commented Version of Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft” 33-34.

¹⁴⁵ Pierson, “Preface.” 1.

him, because “Heydrich may be the architect, but Eichmann as the carpenter and plasterer is the man who will do it.”¹⁴⁶ As evidenced by earlier discussion, and the final film, the filmmakers honed in on this subtext and made it one of the film’s two major historiographical arguments. For them, Wannsee was the moment where Eichmann became a major player, even if he later denied this, and even if other, higher-ranking conference attendees underestimated him. This choice is further revealed by Eichmann’s introductory scenes focusing on a meticulous and ruthless figure obsessed with numbers, especially a scene in which Eichmann instructs butlers to “itemize the costs” for broken china and ensure that the butler who had broken said china pay for all of it.¹⁴⁷

Early comments on the scripts chiefly came from HBO officials like Ani Gasti, Colin Callender, Frank Doelger, and Frank Pierson. The earliest set of available comments (from December 1996, less than one month after the first draft was submitted to HBO), from Colin Callender, then head of HBO NYC Productions (and soon-to-be president of HBO Films), identify the two historiographical arguments of *Conspiracy*: 1) The Wannsee Conference was a way to consolidate Reinhard Heydrich’s power and, by extension, the leadership of the SS in carrying out the so-called Final Solution; and 2) Wannsee was a turning point in the career of Adolf Eichmann.¹⁴⁸ Callender continues by asking for a more clear explanation of the competition between agencies over the Jewish Question; he emphasizes the fact that there was no clear and “centralized” policy before Wannsee. Callender’s comments follow what Holocaust historians broadly refer to as a *functionalist*

¹⁴⁶ Mandel and Pierson, “Commented Version of Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft.”6.

¹⁴⁷ Loring Mandel, “Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01” May 19, 2001, Box 1, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Colin Callender, “Notes/Wannsee,” December 6, 1996, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

interpretation of the Holocaust. That is, rather than the product of a concrete plan set in motion by Hitler (commonly referred to as the *intentionalist* approach), the Holocaust evolved and radicalized in fits and starts, often from the lower ranks, and was the product of competing interest groups from among different governmental agencies.¹⁴⁹ Callender also wonders if the rise of Eichmann after Wannsee is Heydrich's intention and whether this was decided at the conference.¹⁵⁰

Later versions of the script emphasize Eichmann's ascent in importance as more of an accident of history—his position at the conference placed him in the perfect position to carry out the Final Solution. The final script also emphasizes Heydrich viewing Eichmann as a sort of awkward and sometimes embarrassing, albeit extremely competent, subordinate; Heydrich becomes irritated with or dismisses Eichmann on occasion. For example, there is a brief scene towards the end when Heydrich asks the attendees to “astonish Charles Darwin” by agreeing to provide him and the SS with their utmost support in carrying out mass murder. The final version of the script notes that Heydrich resents SS-Colonel Schöngarth's “deference” toward Eichmann and subsequently “passes over” him when going around the table seeking each attendee's agreement to the decisions made at the meeting.¹⁵¹ Later comments by Callender and producer Frank Doelger show that the production team was aware of historical invention and sought to avoid it whenever possible. Early character descriptions provided by Mandel included statements that could not be confirmed historically, the most egregious of which being “I've given him some heart” in reference to Major Rudolf Lange, Commander of the SD (Security Service) and SiPo (Security Police) in

¹⁴⁹ Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988). 95.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵¹ Mandel, “Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01.” 96.

Riga.¹⁵² Like Eichmann, Lange was one of the lowest-ranking attendees at the Wannsee Conference, but his “practical experience,” to use the Protocol’s terminology, made him an important voice at the meeting. Among the men around the meeting table, Lange was unique due to his experience as a “practitioner of mass murder.”¹⁵³ Callender and Doelger rejected the “I’ve given him some heart” statement on the grounds that it “suggest[s] a degree of invention that undermines the factual basis of the script.”¹⁵⁴ This criticism in particular holds up even upon viewing the final film; certain characters, most notably Klopfer, are portrayed in ways that are not supported by the historical record. Not all early comments by the producers were sound. In many instances, they desired unnecessary exposition or wanted to tone down coarser language that they felt sounded “contemporary,” including one of Heydrich’s most chilling lines in the entire screenplay:

We will not sterilize every Jew and wait for the race to die.
We will not sterilize every Jew and then exterminate them,
that’s farcical. Dead men don’t hump, dead women don’t get
pregnant; death is the most reliable form of sterilization, put
it that way.¹⁵⁵

In almost every incidence of coarser language or harsher vocabulary that really hits home the gravity of the issues being discussed or shocks the audience in some way, commenters from the HBO side of things tended to err towards caution. However, Mandel and Pierson fought for the inclusion of this type of language and it ultimately remained in the final film. In the instance of harsher language producers found “contemporary,” the decision to leave it in arguably made the film more accessible. Expunging the dialogue of profanity or explicit

¹⁵² Mandel, “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft.” ii.

¹⁵³ Angrick and Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga*. 260-261

¹⁵⁴ Colin Callender and Frank Doelger, “Notes Conspiracy - Complicity,” June 28, 1997, Box 10, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Mandel, “Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01.” 59.

statements would bowdlerize the film and lend it a *Masterpiece Theater* aesthetic that would do a disservice to the subject matter.

HBO executives were not the only individuals to have extensive input in the script development of *Conspiracy*. Three historians in particular, including a full-time researcher hired by HBO, provided extensive commentary on the script and offered a myriad of suggestions for improving the piece's historical accuracy and historical argument. Michael Berenbaum of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was the official historical consultant for *Conspiracy*, and the amount of comments he submitted attests to that. However, Andrea Axelrod, credited as the film's historical advisor, clearly conducted much more original research and put in a much larger effort into the project than has been publicly acknowledged either in the press or in various publications which reference Berenbaum as if he were the project's sole historical advisor. The production team also consulted Holocaust historian Christopher Browning, who provided brief comments on an early script draft.

The earliest commentary from a historian came in the form of a letter from Michael Berenbaum in 1998. Berenbaum bluntly opened with: "The script doesn't make it. The Wannsee Conference is inherently undramatic." He was more partial to *Complicity* and offered extended commentary on it in this document.¹⁵⁶ Berenbaum then commented on various things that he thought needed correcting in the *Conspiracy* script. Notably, he emphasized the importance of the *age* of the respective characters, who were all relatively young men.¹⁵⁷ By July 2000, Berenbaum was mostly satisfied with the script. However, he advocated several changes in a somewhat rambling document HBO executives, Frank

¹⁵⁶ Michael Berenbaum, "Michael Berenbaum to Frank Doelger," February 5, 1998, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

Pierson, and Loring Mandel were clearly unhappy with. In a few instances, he argued for changes to make the film easier, in his opinion, for the audience. However, one of these changes involved removing Heydrich's line "...[H]istory will mark us for having the gift and the will to advance the human race to greater purity in a space of time so short that Charles Darwin would be astonished."¹⁵⁸ For Berenbaum, this statement was, for some reason, too much for an audience to handle, and he thought that the reference to Darwin should be removed or contextualized with a scene depicting a private conversation between Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann referencing "survival of the fittest."¹⁵⁹ Needless to say, this "creative comment"¹⁶⁰ as Pierson put it did not go over well. In a large internal memo detailing how the production team was responding to comments, criticism, and suggestions from all three historians involved with the project, the producers answered Berenbaum's suggestion by simply stating: "The Darwin reference remains in script. Poor practice to assume that the audience is insufficiently educated."¹⁶¹

This refusal to assume that their audience would be "insufficiently educated" is one of *Conspiracy's* strengths. As with other HBO dramas, little is spelled out for the viewer, and much of the plot is conveyed through subtle turns of phrase or facial expressions. In a sense, the film treats its audience like adults. The idea that historians should "dumb down" history for a non-specialist audience in order to make it palatable or inoffensive is one that most public historians are familiar with. Rather than "dumbing down" complicated histories for

¹⁵⁸ Loring Mandel, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, an Original Drama" April 19, 2000, Box 3, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 90.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Berenbaum, "Michael Berenbaum to Frank Doelger," July 5, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1-2.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, note added and signed by Pierson directly on Berenbaum's text.

¹⁶¹ Ani Gasti, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee - Notes Review," October 2, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 11.

wider audiences, public history is a translation—one is able to tell exceedingly complicated histories by employing language appropriate to the audience. *Conspiracy* does this well by clearly delineating the power struggle between the SS and civilian ministries, emphasizing Heydrich's authority, and using arguments between individuals to illustrate wider conflicts within the Third Reich's government.

With the exception of the brief narration at the film's opening, *Conspiracy* refrains from simplifying history, the main exception, of course, being the invented conflict between Stuckart and Klopfer, which serves to illustrate a wider conflict between the Party and civil service. At its best, *Conspiracy* acts as a translation – it boils down the incredibly complex history of the Holocaust into a ninety-minute film that plops the audience into the middle of a turning point in the history of the Final Solution. In these ninety minutes, the film manages to explain the shift from mass shootings to industrialized murder via gas, how the SS took control of Nazi Jewish policy, and how setbacks on the Eastern Front provided an impetus for an increasingly radicalized policy which culminated at Auschwitz. Most importantly, the film avoids all sentiment. In this sense, the film is closer to the “truth” of the Holocaust than many more-prominent films which focus on escape and survival against all odds. The average Jew's experience during the Holocaust was death, not last-minute mercy. *Conspiracy* manages to get at this truth without depicting a single murder on camera.

Christopher Browning provided comments and critiques during the summer of 2000, which HBO accepted for the most part, with a few exceptions. Browning is most famous for his work on the Reserve Police Battalion 101 in his book *Ordinary Men*, a key work of “functionalist” Holocaust scholarship that explores the “Holocaust of bullets” in the Soviet Union after the German invasion. Browning agreed that the Wannsee Conference was about consolidating Heydrich's power, but he also felt that the script was too heavy-handed at

times, particularly when alcohol was involved. For him, the early script portrayed the conference as “a little too rowdy.”¹⁶² Browning provided a list of minor errors that needed correcting, most of which were corrected in the final version of the script. These errors included German officials referring to each other on a first-name basis; geographical mistakes; whether or not Martin Luther had received a delayed invitation to the conference, references to speeches or events that had not yet happened in January 1942; and other relatively minor points.¹⁶³

Although HBO conceded to Browning’s suggestions for the most part, he had three larger problems with the script that HBO was forced to address. The first is what Browning justifiably refers to as an “absurd” subplot involving Martin Luther, representative of the Foreign Ministry, and his dog. In early versions of the script, Martin Luther brought his German shepherd with him and at several instances left the conference area to check on her. By the time of this meeting, the producers were still set on including this subplot, but it was eventually dropped due to lack of historical evidence and being too similar to scenes in *Die Wannseekonferenz*, where Major Rudolf Lange brings his German shepherd with him from Latvia. Browning’s second point of contention with the script is the amount of alcohol and “rowdy” atmosphere of the conference. HBO eventually responded to this with discussions about whether or not this was too similar to *Die Wannseekonferenz* and reduced the overall amount of references to alcohol in the script. HBO’s legal department even went so far as to catalog every time alcohol or tobacco were visible in *Die Wannseekonferenz* in order to avoid

¹⁶²Christopher R. Browning, “Christopher Browning to Ani Gasti,” August 22, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 1-7.

copyright infringement.¹⁶⁴ Browning's largest issue with the script was the portrayal of Dr. Wilhelm Stuckart. Browning felt that the script portrayed Stuckart as too much of a moderate who was potentially not fully on board with the Final Solution. For Browning, Stuckart's anger can be explained by Heydrich and the SS finally wresting control from civilian ministries, one of which he represented.¹⁶⁵ The production team argued that Stuckart's anger in the script was not due to objecting to specific policies, but rather due to having authored the Nuremberg Laws and feeling that his legal "baby" was being done away with via SS fiat.¹⁶⁶ This assertion is supported by the script, which emphasizes Stuckart's authorship of the Nuremberg laws and his monologue on the "sublimely clever," "arrogant," and "calculating" Jew.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, this same monologue includes a line about the Jews "reject[ing] The Christ" which Browning found anachronistic due to Nazi anti-Semitism's emphasis on racial rather than religious justifications for anti-Semitism.¹⁶⁸ This line remains in the final film and does not square with Stuckart's historical anti-Semitism. A legal scholar and committed Nazi, Stuckart would not have cited religious reasons for his anti-Semitism. The Nuremberg Laws themselves justify the exclusion of Jews from German society on *racial* grounds and *racial theory* because, after all, they redefine citizenship to be based on German blood.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, his denunciation of "vulgar" anti-Semitism espoused by the Party contradicts his statement about the Jews rejecting Christ as exploiting older, religious-based anti-Semitism precisely fits the "vulgar" anti-Semitism Stuckart is attacking so vehemently in this monologue.

¹⁶⁴ Steven M. Blacher, "The Wannsee Conference' Portrayal of Drink/Food," October 10, 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 4-5.

¹⁶⁶ Gasti, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee - Notes Review." 13.

¹⁶⁷ Mandel, "Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01." 61.

¹⁶⁸ Browning, "Christopher Browning to Ani Gasti." 5.

¹⁶⁹ Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1: The Years of Persecution*. 142.

It is also important to keep in mind that this back and forth between filmmakers, historians, and the producers makes it evident that film is rarely the product of a single vision, of an auteur. *Conspiracy* was very clearly a collaborative project, even in the early stages of writing. Collaboration refined its historical argument, removed (for the most part) inaccuracies, but also provided some challenges. Although collaborative work itself is certainly not a criteria for whether something is “public” history, it certainly is a common thread. Most museum exhibits, large documentary editing projects, park interpretation, oral histories, and other public history projects are collaborative by their very nature, whether the involved historians collaborate with other historians, community partners, other institutions, government agencies, or simply individuals from other fields that happen to work on the same projects. Public history is, for the most part, the opposite of the stereotypical view of history as the product of an individual’s research conducted without the help of others. Filmmaking is just as collaborative, if not more so. One only needs to take a look a credits reel to appreciate the fact that any film is no small undertaking driven by single-minded directorial visions.

Researcher Andrea Axelrod provided the most extensive amount of commentary and additional research for *Conspiracy*. The majority of Axelrod’s input took place after April 2000. She was very familiar with the historiography of the Third Reich and the Wannsee Conference. Around a month before shooting commenced, Axelrod provided a document that managed to cite most scenes, lines, or other statements within the script. In total, the document provides almost 170 citations for a script totaling a little over one hundred pages, a much larger figure than the citations visible in the script itself. Axelrod cites a plethora of sources, the most important of course being the Wannsee Protocol; Eichmann’s trial transcripts; evidence gathered for the Nuremberg Trials; biographies of conference

participants; interviews with members of the Wannsee Memorial Museum staff; and German and Anglophone historians like Claudia Koonz, Christopher Browning, Raul Hillberg, Günther Deschner, Hans Mommsen, and others.¹⁷⁰ With few exceptions, these are all academic—rather than popular—histories. Axelrod and the production team were familiar with Holocaust historiography and both their bibliography and extended comments prove this. This exhaustive document, while by no means as extensively cited as an academic book project, is nevertheless cited and footnoted to a degree that one would be hard-pressed to characterize it as anything other than a historian doing a historian's work.

Additionally, Axelrod produced a script review, of which roughly 40% is available. She clearly went above and beyond the amount of citations that Mandel himself had provided. She even contacted the German Weather Service to find out if snow blanketed the Wannsee area on 20 January 1942. The script review also confirms that Axelrod collaborated with Gaby M. Oelrichs, then head librarian at the Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz.¹⁷¹ The script review references recent developments in historiography, including whether or not the SS had confiscated the Wannsee Villa from a wealthy Jew.¹⁷² It would be impossible to exhaustively list everything from the script that Axelrod found a citation for, but it includes tidbits like whether Heydrich would have shuffled his note cards (yes, he liked to adlib) or to which attendees Stuckart would be likely to complain about the large SS-presence at the meeting.¹⁷³ Axelrod cites a range of what was then cutting-edge Holocaust scholarship from both the Anglosphere and Germany, most notably Hans Mommsen's work

¹⁷⁰ Andrea Axelrod, "Sources for September 13, 2000 Script," September 13, 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹⁷¹ Andrea Axelrod, "*Conspiracy*: Script Review," June 23, 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 2.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13.

on the Civil Service and the Holocaust, which emphasizes a weakened Civil Service that took a backseat to SS domination.¹⁷⁴

To be certain, not all of Axelrod's objections were taken into account, notably one she had to the conflict between Stuckart and Klopfer, a conflict which has no basis in reality and instead seems to use the two as avatars of the Civil Service and the Party, respectively, in order to show the audience a broader view of the tangled rivalries among agencies and power-holders during the Third Reich.¹⁷⁵ This hypothesis is the only way the film's heated conflict between Stuckart and Klopfer makes even a bit of sense, as both men not only knew each other, but had collaborated on a journal that dealt with "ethnically based constitution and administration." In other words, on a project that was clearly grounded in a shared understanding of race.¹⁷⁶ Although the production team ignored a few of Axelrod's critiques—most notably the one about the invented conflict between Klopfer and Stuckart—the majority of her criticisms and suggestions made their way into the final film. A few months after Axelrod wrote this document, *Conspiracy* completed filming in London and Berlin and would air in the US the following spring.

Although the film offers a nuanced view of the Holocaust and its perpetrators, and focuses on the fits and starts, radicalization, and competing interests involved, HBO's promotional material for *Conspiracy* took a different tack. In an April 2001 press release, HBO advertised *Conspiracy* as the story of how the "blueprint for the Holocaust" came to be and that the Wannsee Protocol is "the only document where the details of Hitler's maniacal plan were actually codified." Furthermore, the press release gives us the mistaken impression

¹⁷⁴ Andrea Axelrod, "Overall Issues Part II," June 23, 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 4.

¹⁷⁶ Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting*. 90.

that *Conspiracy* is a reenactment of the Protocol *verbatim*, something it certainly is not.¹⁷⁷

Rather, *Conspiracy* is an attempt at “present[ing] a close approximation of actually being there, as if it were a live event,” not a documentary recreation of what can be found in the Protocol itself.¹⁷⁸ This reluctance to describe the film as a documentary serves two purposes. First, it absolves the filmmakers of criticism (in their own eyes, this does not, of course, place them off limits to historians) regarding any historical inaccuracies present in the film. Second, it speaks to a desire on the part of the filmmakers to make a case for *dramatic film* as a method of communicating history to a wide audience. Unlike documentaries (and, arguably, lesser-quality dramatic films), a good dramatic film shows rather than tells; it relies sparingly on exposition and uses all the aspects of the medium (staging, cinematography, acting, editing) to tell a story in ways that are simultaneously more restricted, yet more free, than traditional ways of telling a historical narrative. By its very nature as a visual medium, dramatic film provides the public historian with a different set of challenges than those faced by historians working with more text-based forms of imparting historical knowledge like an article, museum exhibit, or a narration-driven documentary. Pierson and Mandel in particular repeatedly and explicitly state in HBO memoranda and correspondence that they are not seeking to create a documentary or a school lecture that provides all the historical context a textbook or documentary film would provide. When asked by HBO executives, or consulted historians like Michael Berenbaum, to make the film a bit easier on the audience via explanations or voiceovers, they repeatedly refused and very little, apart from brief statements that bookend the film, remains in the final cut.

¹⁷⁷ HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star in HBO Films’ *Conspiracy*, Debuting May 19” (HBO Films, April 5, 2001), Box 15, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

One key point made by Pierson that sums up the view he and Mandel had of film as history as well as their goal with *Conspiracy* can be found in a 1997 letter that he wrote to producer Frank Doelger. The production team had been arguing back and forth over whether to make a historical narrative more clear to the audience, in other words, to spell it out for them. In response, Pierson argued that such tactics would reduce the project to “dry documentary” and that this defeats the purpose of the film.¹⁷⁹ For Pierson, the audience’s emotional response of the film was paramount: the audience should be “getting angry and it should be emotional.”¹⁸⁰ Showing a historical event was more important than exposition via voiceover narration: “We are almost always up against the tendency to move the subtext into text – which is the exact opposite of drama.”¹⁸¹ This tension between the needs of drama and the imparting of historical truths cuts to the heart of the dilemma faced by filmmakers or historians trying to produce historical films. Many ideas that sound good at first, including expository narration that provides background information throughout the film, can be much less effective in the filmic medium. Pierson’s commitment to showing rather than telling also places *Conspiracy* firmly in the camp of HBO’s “difficult” dramas of the early 2000s like *The Wire*—a series notorious for eschewing exposition and dropping the viewer in an unfamiliar world and storyline. Furthermore, *Conspiracy* makes villains the main characters—an uncommon practice even by 2001. HBO’s *The Sopranos* is a notable example of television succeeding at this, albeit in a much different way than *Conspiracy*. Indeed, Frank Pierson argued that “[t]he one truly different, shocking and original aspect of *Conspiracy* is

¹⁷⁹ Frank Pierson, “Frank Pierson to Frank Doelger,” August 15, 1997, Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 1.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 1.

presenting (in a sense) the Holocaust from the Nazi point of view.”¹⁸² In this sense, no matter how flawed or in some cases, over-the-top it can be, *Conspiracy* succeeds in this endeavor. It manages to “represent the un-representable” without depicting a single death on-screen and without crossing the line into either didactic docudrama or campy horror-movie clichés. It places the viewer at a version of the Wannsee Conference that, with one or two exceptions, follows the major historiography of its time and responds to it. The film translates a vast amount of complicated history into a manageable ninety-minute drama touching on a key moment in the history of the Holocaust’s evolution. It manages to keep the source material front and center during the film (there is even a title card at the end of the film discussing the only surviving copy of the Protocol); make an argument about the meeting; cause us to reexamine our ideas about supposedly unideological “desk murderers” like Eichmann; and get across an important historical truth: namely, that the Holocaust was not perpetrated by monsters, but rather by exceedingly “normal,” educated, middle-class, professional, “modern” men who met for drinks and cigars in January 1942.

¹⁸² Frank Pierson, “Notes for Complicity,” February 9, 2001, Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 3.

KRITZINGER

Yes. The rest is Argument. The curse of my profession.

LANGE

I studied Law as well.

KRITZINGER

How do you apply that education to what you do?

LANGE

It has made me...distrustful of language. A gun means what it says.¹⁸³

Chapter Three: *Die Wannseekonferenz* and *Conspiracy*

This chapter compares and contrasts *Conspiracy* with its German-language predecessor, *Die Wannseekonferenz* (1984), directed by Heinz Schirk and written by Paul Mommertz. It begins with a description of *Die Wannseekonferenz*, its production history, historical context, and then moves into a comparison of both films, an analysis of their respective receptions, and a critique of both as works of public history. Due to the lack of archival material related to *Die Wannseekonferenz*, the first section relies largely on information gleaned from contemporary German newspapers, the website of screenwriter Paul Mommertz, and email interviews with Mommertz conducted by the author.

I. *Die Wannseekonferenz* (1984)

Die Wannseekonferenz, a joint production of the Austrian television network ORF and the West German network Bayerischer Rundfunk, is very similar to HBO's *Conspiracy* at first glance. The film reenacts the Wannsee Conference in real time and argues that the meeting was largely about Heydrich and the SS demonstrating their supremacy in all matters related

¹⁸³ Mandel, "Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01." 68.

to the Final Solution. *Die Wannseekonferenz* begins with a shot of the front gate of the actual villa at Am Großen Wannsee 56-58, (the entire film was shot on location in the actual conference house) flanked by two members of the German *Schutzpolizei* or uniformed police force. Most of the conference attendees have already arrived by the film's beginning, the SS are jovial, tell jokes, and get tipsy from cognac. Even Eichmann partakes and appears to be in good spirits. The Wannsee hotel's status as an SS-run site is quite apparent. Switchboard operators have a station set up and Eichmann stops by at several points during the film to coordinate transports of Jews. In scenes where Eichmann loses his temper with the other party members over the phone, his abusive tendencies towards subordinates and groveling towards superiors are emphasized. The Nazi officials discuss mass murder almost immediately; a drunk SS Major Lange mentions gas vans, which were precursors to the death factories at Treblinka and Auschwitz—a revelation that *Conspiracy* only hints at much deeper into the story.

Once Heydrich arrives, he orders Müller, Eichmann, Lange, and Luther to another room and holds a pre-meeting to discuss the course of the Holocaust thus far, the day's agenda, and outline his strategy for bringing the civilian bureaucrats from various government ministries and the Party in line. Heydrich tells Eichmann, Lange, and Müller that their objective is to “force [civilian ministries and the Party] to share responsibility...or stumble into it.”¹⁸⁴ During this pre-meeting, the entry of the United States into the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor dominates their discussion of current events, which is important because the Wannsee Conference was delayed by a month due to the American declaration of war.¹⁸⁵ Eichmann discusses early experiments with Zyklon B in Auschwitz and an

¹⁸⁴ Heinz Schirk, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drama, History, (1984).

¹⁸⁵ Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting*, 60.

increasingly inebriated Lange—who later falls asleep during the meeting—discusses the mass shootings he led in Riga. Lange’s experiences in the *Einsatzgruppen* are directly cited as a reason to shift towards industrial-scale killing with poison gas, due to the “emotional burden” (emotionale Belastung) carried by those like him who have conducted mass shootings. Lange has also brought his German shepherd along; the dog constantly interrupts the meeting, providing comic relief. Humor is ever-present in the film, which takes a darkly comic turn and at one point veers into slapstick. Heydrich often tells jokes and laughs throughout the film; he comes across as a humorous playboy in many scenes. Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, is an ever-present figure lurking in the background: Heydrich refers to his orders, receives a telephone call from him, and a photograph of Himmler literally looms in the background during an early scene.

The meeting itself takes place in the actual dining room at the historical location. All of the SS representatives sit on one side of the table and this seating arrangement plus camerawork help emphasize the SS’ domination over the proceedings. Indeed, at various points throughout the film, members of the SS stand up and literally stride across the room while making statements. A large map of Europe is placed at the head of the table and Heydrich often rises from the table to use the map as a visual aid. A female stenotypist interjects at various points and serves as an audience surrogate; Heydrich’s answers to her questions explain complicated issues for the audience. Earlier in the film, she asks Dr. Wilhelm Stuckart about the Nuremberg Laws and he goes on to explain the *Mischlinge* issue and mixed marriages. Furthermore, she and Heydrich flirt throughout the film and this dynamic serves to illustrate Heydrich’s historical reputation for womanizing. The camera pans freely around the conference table; this is not a static or conventionally-shot docudrama. In one single take, the camera pans over halfway around the table while

Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger expresses his doubts about the reasons for the meeting and about the plight of Berlin's Jews, who had started committing suicide as deportations began.

Like *Conspiracy*, *Die Wannseekonferenz* utilizes and responds to historical literature and takes a historiographical position. The overall argument of *Die Wannseekonferenz* is in line with intentionalist historiography, which is a school of thought characterized by an emphasis on Hitler and top-down decisionmaking. This is best illustrated by the presence of Hitler in the film. As with Himmler, Hitler's presence overshadows the entire film. It is abundantly clear that the unfolding Final Solution is a plan directed by Hitler himself. A bust of Hitler looms behind Kritzinger, emphasizing both his position in the Reich Chancellery and his weakened position at the Conference. Heydrich points out that Hitler's verbal orders are worth more than any written statements. Furthermore, characters reference two classic examples used by intentionalist historians. First, Heydrich refers to Hitler's speech of January 30, 1939, in which he prophesized the destruction of European Jews:

Today I want to be a prophet again: If international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe again succeeds in precipitating the nations into a world war, the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth and with it the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.¹⁸⁶

At the end of the film, Stuckart and Kritzinger discuss the meeting's outcome and what that means for the future. Stuckart expresses disgust at the meeting and states that he wishes to resign from the Ministry of the Interior and volunteer for the front lines. He then tells Kritzinger that Hitler had expressed a desire to gas the Jews in *Mein Kampf*. A few minutes earlier, Heydrich had referenced a specific page number of the book and told Kritzinger to "learn to take the Führer at his word." Stuckart paraphrases the following passage:

¹⁸⁶ Adolf Hitler, Speech of 20 January 1939, quoted in Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1: The Years of Persecution*. 310. Note that Friedländer is often associated with the "intentionalist" school of Holocaust historians.

If, at the beginning of the War and during the War, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebraic corrupters of the nation had been subjected to poison gas such as had to be endured in the field by hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers of all classes and professions, then the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain.¹⁸⁷

The use of these two quotes from Hitler himself illustrates the filmmaker's argument for the Holocaust as a plan drawn up by Hitler from the beginning. Indeed, Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* concluded in his 1987 review of the film, "Mr. Schirck and Mr. Mommertz are clearly intentionalists." Although functionalism dominates current Holocaust historiography, intentionalism was very strong during the 1980s. Many of the key differences in portrayals of certain characters and the historical argument of *Conspiracy* can be attributed to changes in Holocaust historiography that made the functionalist position more prominent during the 1990s. HBO's script review from functionalist historian Christopher Browning further underscores this key difference between the two films.

Die Wannseekonferenz arrived in the midst of a wave of German and Austrian television productions that unpacked and explored the legacies of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. West Germany (the BRD) and, to a lesser extent, Austria had begun facing their difficult pasts after the 1968 Student Movement and a series of Holocaust-themed television productions during the 1970s, most notably NBC's *Holocaust* (1974). This process of exploring and uncovering the previously-hidden or whitewashed past is a key concept in German history and memory known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or "coming to terms with the past." *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the dominant force—indeed, an obligation—in contemporary German historical culture, whether in academia, politics, the mass media, museums, or historic sites. The historian Wulf Kansteiner characterizes the wave of German

¹⁸⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal And Hitchcock, 1941), <http://archive.org/details/meinkampf035176mbp>. 984.

docudramas that explore the Nazi past as part of a larger cultural “routine” which began in the 1960s.¹⁸⁸ He also argues that “West German television popularized the task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and shaped the collective memory of the Holocaust.”¹⁸⁹ *Die Wannseekonferenz* belongs to this tradition of using television to explore and work through the difficult past. However, it is important to note that for most of its history, West German television—which was exclusively publicly-financed until the mid-1980s—avoided truly difficult aspects of the Nazi past, especially German guilt. During the 1960s, these television programs largely consisted of what Kansteiner characterizes as “philo-Semitic” dramas or stories about rescuing persecuted Jews. German guilt and stories about the perpetrators were absent from German television during this period.¹⁹⁰ However, Kansteiner goes on to argue that West German television portrayed the Holocaust as a “genocide without perpetrators” and consciously avoided productions that could make viewers uncomfortable by critically examining German guilt.¹⁹¹ *Die Wannseekonferenz* clearly stands outside of this paradigm with its exclusive focus on the perpetrators and lack of sentimentality.

In addition to its place within the television history of Austria and the BRD, *Die Wannseekonferenz* is the product of the most heated historical controversy in postwar Germany, the *Historikerstreit*, or “historians’ quarrel. This politically-charged historiographical argument played out in German newspapers and magazines throughout the 1980s. The *Historikerstreit* focused on whether the Holocaust was unique or if it could be compared to other genocides in history, thus rehabilitating Germany’s national self-image.¹⁹² In addition to the argument over the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the *Historikerstreit* also included the

¹⁸⁸ Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*. 5.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 111.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 112-115.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 122.

¹⁹² Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*. 1.

intentionalism versus functionalism debate discussed earlier. Some intentionalist historians decried what they saw as the functionalists attempt to “relativize” the Holocaust due to their push for its historicization. Functionalists argue that focusing on Hitler at the center absolves the actual perpetrators of guilt.¹⁹³ *Die Wannseekonferenz*’s intentionalist stance at this particular point in time places it as one of the early products of the *Historikerstreit*. By virtue of its stance, the film took a position in this very public debate.

Die Wannseekonferenz is the brainchild of the director Heinz Schirk and the writer Paul Mommertz. Although no archival collection as vast as the Loring Mandel Papers exists for this film (there is a collection of his research material at the Wannsee Conference Memorial’s archive in Berlin), it is still possible to trace the production history and Mommertz’s research process based on articles in the German press, his personal website, and an email interview with him that I conducted earlier this year. Before writing the script for *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Mommertz had collaborated with Heinz Schirk on a Heydrich biopic. According to Mommertz, the German-Israeli producer Manfred Korytowski had to produce a film on the Wannsee Conference for years and only got the green light from Bayerischer Rundfunk after he attached Mommertz to the project because Mommertz had previously written documentaries and was a trained historian.¹⁹⁴ Mommertz spent over a year conducting archival research for the script, this included the archives of the ministries represented at the meeting.¹⁹⁵ Mommertz provides a list of the archival material he consulted for the film on his website. This material consisted of over 500 pages of archival sources. Mommertz actually

¹⁹³ Ibid, 95.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Mommertz, Email Interview with Paul Mommertz, interview by Nicholas Johnson, Email, May 18, 2016.

¹⁹⁵ Paul Mommertz, “„WIR LEBEN NICHT SO LANGE, WIE WIR ERSCHÜTTERT SEIN MÜSSTEN“,” *VT-Zeitung* Nr. 1, September 19, 1986, <http://paul-mommertz.de/wannsee04.html>.

wrote the script at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich (IfZ).¹⁹⁶ He also lists published sources that were important to the project, these include both key works of history and primary sources such as Albert Speer's memoirs.¹⁹⁷

Mommertz sees the portrayal of the Holocaust through film as an imperative both as a historian and as a former member of the Hitler Youth (he was fifteen when the war ended). For him, confronting Nazi crimes became his "purpose in life." He acknowledges that film "is always in danger of becoming melodramatic." He discusses the language used by his characters and says that he "as a contemporary witness (of the Nazi period), I still have their language in my ear."¹⁹⁸ Mommertz further explains his intentions for *Die*

Wannseekonferenz:

I saw it as my task to dramatically abstain from all filmic effects, because I see it as absolutely inappropriate for this subject. I restrained myself completely, let the facts speak for themselves and left the judgement up to the viewer. I see that as the only possibility to reasonably do justice to the subject matter.¹⁹⁹

Mommertz intended to create a historical film that avoided exaggeration, over-dramatization, and sought to present an important historical event as objectively as possible. Like *Conspiracy*, the dialogue is an invention grounded in historical research. He addressed this in a 1986 interview where he referred to the language used at other Nazi conferences, including one held by Hermann Goering after Kristallnacht in 1938. For him, each of the three groups present at Wannsee had their own ways of talking about the Jews and the Holocaust, in a

¹⁹⁶ "Paul Mommertz | Materialien Zum Film „Die Wannseekonferenz“, "Akten" accessed July 9, 2016, <http://paul-mommertz.de/wannseeAkten.html>.

¹⁹⁷ "Paul Mommertz | Materialien Zum Film „Die Wannseekonferenz“, "Literatur" accessed July 9, 2016, <http://paul-mommertz.de/wannseeLiteratur.html>.

¹⁹⁸ Paul Mommertz, Email Interview with Paul Mommertz.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.. Original: "Ich habe es als meine Aufgabe angesehen, dramaturgisch von allen filmischen Effekten abzusehen, weil ich sie bei diesem Thema für absolut unangemessen halte. Ich habe mich vollständig zurückgehalten, die Tatsachen sprechen lassen und das Urteil dem Zuschauer überlassen. Das halte ich für die einzige Möglichkeit, dem Thema einigermaßen gerecht zu werden."

way, each institution had its own “dialect”: “The tragedy of millions of people was discussed cynically by the SS, bureaucratically by the representatives of the ministries, vulgar and plebian by the representatives of the Party.”²⁰⁰ This is played out in the film; the SS constantly jokes about mass murder while the ministry representatives look on and engage in legalistic arguments. One can also see this divide into three distinct linguistic camps in *Conspiracy*, but it is important to note that Mommertz is using this technique in order to emphasize the three different spheres of power within the Third Reich’s government.

II. Reception of both *Conspiracy* and *Die Wannseekonferenz*

Both films made about the Wannsee Conference have generally been well-received, although they are not without their critics, particularly from historians. The biggest difference between the two is that *Die Wannseekonferenz* was at the center of a debate in West Germany’s most prominent periodical, while *Conspiracy* escaped harsh critique from the press. *Die Wannseekonferenz* provoked a debate in *Der Spiegel* in which Mommertz himself took part. As early as 1977, a review in the center-left newspaper *Die Zeit* criticized Mommertz’s previous film, *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager des Terrors* for not portraying Holocaust victims and paradoxically argued that Mommertz was glorifying Heydrich with his portrayal. This particularly harsh review echoes later German criticism of *Die Wannseekonferenz* and illustrates the moral minefield encountered when producing films about the Holocaust or the Third Reich:

The millions remain silent, so that [Heydrich] can enjoy his role to the fullest: No gassed child, no skeleton, no ramp (e.g. at Auschwitz), even the bench which Jews were not allowed to sit on at that time in Germany didn’t come into the picture. The state of mind of the victims (perhaps one of them also

²⁰⁰ Mommertz, “„WIR LEBEN NICHT SO LANGE, WIE WIR ERSCHÜTTERT SEIN MÜSSTEN.“” Original: “Die Tragödie von Millionen Menschen wurde zynisch diskutiert bei der SS, bürokratisch bei den Vertretern der Ministerien, vulgär und pöbelhaft bei den Vertretern der Partei.”

had a funny father and a strict mother; one of the countless whose date of death is unknown in contrast with Heydrich's hour of death?), the state of mind of the victims, the nameless with his dreadful everyman's end, was not mentioned.^{201 202}

Wolfgang Benz has noted that some historical films, including *Die Wannseekonferenz*, attract negative attention not just from historians and university faculty, but also from film and television critics.²⁰³ In 1984, *Der Spiegel* editor Heinz Höhne scathingly reviewed *Die Wannseekonferenz*. His review attacks television for its obsession with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and insinuates that too many Holocaust-themed films had been released and that *Die Wannseekonferenz* adds nothing of value to an already-saturated landscape of history-themed television. Höhne praises Schirk's directorial abilities and the acting chops of Dietrich Mattausch (Heydrich) and Gerd Böckmann (Eichmann), but takes Mommertz to task for creating what he sees as a mostly-invented portrayal: "This is not the Wannsee Conference that historians know. It is the Wannsee Conference a la Paul Mommertz."²⁰⁴ Höhne then curiously argues that Mommertz should not have made Eichmann as important of a figure in the film and claims that unnamed "historians" know that Eichmann had an insignificant role. In this sense, Höhne is just accepting Eichmann's testimony at face value like Hannah Arendt. Most tellingly, he cites Eichmann's earlier—and later contradicted—statements in order to prove that no discussions of mass murder took place, only "evacuation." This takes

²⁰¹ "Fernseh-Kritik: Der Große Dämon Reinhard H.," *Die Zeit*, August 5, 1977, sec. Gesellschaft, <http://www.zeit.de/1977/32/der-grosse-daemon-reinhard-h>.

²⁰² Translation of: "Die Millionen blieben stumm, damit der eine seine Rolle auskosten konnte: Kein vergastetes Kind, kein Skelett, keine Rampe, nicht einmal die Bank kam ins Bild, auf der Juden nicht sitzen durften, damals in Deutschland. Die Seelenlage der Opfer (vielleicht hatte da auch jemand einen lustigen Vater und eine pflichtstrenge Mutter: einer der Unzähligen, deren Todesdatum man, im Unterschied zu Heydrichs Sterbestunde, nicht kennt?), die Seelenlage der Opfer, der Namenlosen mit ihrem schauerhaften Jedermanns Ende, wurde nicht erwähnt."

²⁰³ Wolfgang Benz, "Wie Authentisch Muß Der Bericht Über Ein Geschichtliches Ereignis Sein? Anmerkungen Eines Historikers Zu „Schindlers Liste“: Bilder Statt Fußnoten," *Die Zeit*, March 4, 1994, sec. Kultur, <http://www.zeit.de/1994/10/bilder-statt-fussnoten>.

²⁰⁴ Heinz Höhne, "Eine Falle Der Betroffenheit," *Der Spiegel*, December 17, 1984, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13511955.html>.

the highly-euphemistic Wannsee Protocol at its word and completely ignores the nuanced and euphemism-charged language of Nazi bureaucracy. Höhne continues and accuses Mommertz of ignoring his historical advisors at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich (IfZ) and Israeli historian Shlomo Aronson. The Mommertz portrayed here is a vain and arrogant filmmaker with no use for historians—something that seems more than questionable given Mommertz’s graduate training as a historian and relatively open policy of listing all of the sources he consulted for the film. Höhne argues that not enough source material on the Wannsee Conference exists to create a film of this length, a curious assertion considering the number of books and articles published on the conference. He then recounts an alleged falling out between Mommertz and Aronson due to various historical errors, including the portrayal of Stuckart as a less-than-enthusiastic Nazi (a criticism echoed in later critiques of *Conspiracy*). Although Höhne’s review has valid criticisms, it mostly comes across as a too-conservative journalist attacking film for not adhering to a murky definition of historical “facts” and for engaging in what every single dramatic film is forced to do by the very nature of the medium: inventing dialogue and conflict.

In an unusual move (according to Mommertz)²⁰⁵, *Der Spiegel* gave him the opportunity to reply with a full-length article of his own in January 1985. This article responds to Höhne point by point and recounts evidence for each of the participants having known about the Holocaust, something that Höhne had contested. However, Mommertz evades answering Höhne’s assertions about Aronson or his criticism about the portrayal of Stuckart. At the end of his response, Mommertz fires a broadside against the charge that not enough historical evidence exists to create a ninety-minute film about Wannsee:

I have six folders with original documents from the Conference’s environment at my disposal. I am also a historian. Perhaps it is conceivable

²⁰⁵ Paul Mommertz, Email Interview with Paul Mommertz.

that a historian, after fourteen months of specialized study in a particular subject area is a bit ahead of other historians.^{206 207}

Later in 1985, Mommertz also wrote a lengthy response to his critics in which he repeated some of his arguments in his *Der Spiegel* article. In this response, Mommertz argues for the historical film in a radical way reminiscent of Robert Rosenstone: “Before this film, there was not a single monograph about the Wannsee Conference. The film is the first and furthermore historically-grounded portrayal of the Conference ever.”²⁰⁸ While technically correct, it is important to remember that historical monographs do not need to invent dialogue and that the film medium requires a certain degree of fictionalization that is unavoidable no matter how many archival sources the filmmaker consults. Although *Die Wannseekonferenz* initially sparked outrage in the German press, later reviews and articles about it treat the film much more favorably. With few exceptions, historians ignore the film or treat it as a footnote. Steven Lehrer devotes one paragraph to the film in his book about the Wannsee House in which he refrains from commenting on the film at all, instead quoting reviewer Leonard Maltin: “According to Maltin, the film presents a fascinating, chilling recreation of the conference.”²⁰⁹ German-language scholars tend to be more forgiving, but no detailed analysis of *Die Wannseekonferenz* has yet taken place. Furthermore, some commenters tend to erroneously hold the film up as a “sober” and “historically

²⁰⁶ Paul Mommertz, “Völlig Unrealistisch Und Lebensfremd,” *Der Spiegel*, January 1985.

²⁰⁷ Translation of “Ich verfüge über sechs Ordner mit Originaldokumenten aus dem Umfeld der Konferenz. Auch ich bin Historiker. Vielleicht ist es denkbar, dass ein Historiker nach vierzehn Monaten Spezialstudien auf einem besonderen Sachgebiet anderen Historikern ein wenig voraus ist.”

²⁰⁸ Paul Mommertz, “DIE WANNSEEKONFERENZ - ‘Von Der Abwehr Einer Historischen Information Durch Filmkritik’ - Festschrift Zum DAG-Fernsehpreis 1985,” 1985, <http://www.paul-mommertz.de/wannsee03.html>.

²⁰⁹ Lehrer, *Wannsee House and the Holocaust*. 180.

grounded” alternative to *Conspiracy*, which is often portrayed as “overblown” or “over-dramatized.”²¹⁰

The fact that *Conspiracy* is an HBO/BBC production led some critics to dismiss it as “Hollywood,” which obscures the great difference between how movie studios and premium cable networks approach filmmaking. The right-wing German magazine *Blaue Narzisse* epitomizes this now-hackneyed criticism by referring to *Conspiracy* as “completely overblown.”²¹¹ This criticism of *Conspiracy* holds water in some areas but is not sufficient to completely dismiss the film; these same criticisms can equally be applied to the Austro-German film, in which certain characters also do not behave as they would have historically. Kritzinger and Stuckart are portrayed as doubters instead of committed Nazis; the film is not “sober” enough. One can even see this attitude on display if one compares the German and English Wikipedia entries on the Wannsee Conference. The German page praises *Die Wannseekonferenz* and then claims that due to the dialogue being invented, the film is not historically-grounded. This exact criticism can be applied to *Die Wannseekonferenz* as most of its dialogue is also invented. The page further makes an unsourced claim stating that the film made Kritzinger look like a doubter, which is supposedly historically incorrect—again an area where both films are in agreement.²¹² Curiously, German newspapers and periodicals praised *Conspiracy* at the same level seen in British and American periodicals. *Der Tagesspiegel* noted that the production “leaves no doubt that all 15 attending Nazi policymakers

²¹⁰ See the IMDB user reviews of both films for some of these typical statements:
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088377/reviews?start=0>
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266425/reviews?filter=hate>

²¹¹ Benjamin Marx, “Die Wannseekonferenz: Unterhaltsame Geschichtsstunde Mit Kleinen Mängeln,” *Blaue Narzisse*, accessed July 12, 2016, <http://www.blauenarzisse.de/index.php/rezension/item/969-die-wannseekonferenz-unterhaltsame-geschichtsstunde-mit-kleinen-maengeln>

²¹² “Wannseekonferenz,” *Wikipedia*, July 11, 2016, <https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wannseekonferenz&oldid=156059037>.

supported the annihilation of the Jews.”²¹³ This latter claim is intriguing because many commenters—both online and in literature—seem to believe that Colin Firth had portrayed Stuckart as being against the Final Solution, whereas the filmmakers are on record stating that his objections in the film are due to protection of his “baby,” the Nuremberg Laws, not any humanitarian concern.

Much like its German-language predecessor, *Conspiracy* mostly remains a footnote or wholly ignored by historians. Mark Roseman mentions *Conspiracy* as part of the public’s view of Wannsee. For him, the meeting at Wannsee—which took place without Hitler—contradicts a conventional view of the Holocaust that places Hitler at the center of the decision-making process. He argues that *Conspiracy*’s creators were aware of this conventional view and thus felt the need to suggest a Hitler order (in the narration sequence beginning the film) as the catalyst for the meeting without stating that Hitler himself pulled the strings behind the meeting.²¹⁴ The lines in question occur at the start of the film as an aerial shot reveals the Wannsee villa and Heydrich’s plane:

NARRATOR

While he hired and fired Generals and winter grew colder, 15 of his officials were ordered from their comments and ministries to meet in a quiet lakeside residence at Wannsee, in Berlin far from the crisis at the front. In two hours, these men changed the world forever. Only one record of what was said and done here survives from the wreckage of what was the Thousand Year Reich.²¹⁵

Roseman is correct that the film’s opening narration emphasizes Hitler; the first line of the film is, after all, “Adolf Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, starting World War Two.”²¹⁶

Nevertheless, the lines mentioned in his article are harder to pin down. While *Hitler* “hired

²¹³ Kurt Sagatz, “Drehbuch Des Schreckens,” *Der Tagespiegel*, January 29, 2010, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/medien/tv-film-drehbuch-des-schreckens/1672252.html>.

²¹⁴ Roseman, “‘Wannsee’ als Herausforderung,” 402.

²¹⁵ Mandel, “Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01.” 2.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 1.

and fired *his* generals,” the Wannsee Conference attendees “*were* ordered.” Mandel made this part of the line passive, which makes it more difficult to assess who exactly ordered the meeting (according to Mandel and Pierson) at this point in the film. Later in the film, Heydrich quotes from a Goering letter²¹⁷ which provided him (and the conference attendees) with the “mandate” to carry out the Final Solution.²¹⁸ Although Roseman is correct to point out the narration’s focus on Hitler, the actual film is much more nuanced than this suggests, especially when compared with *Die Wannseekonferenz*, which directly references Hitler’s speeches and a passage from *Mein Kampf* in order to draw a line between Hitler’s pre-war statements and the Holocaust, in addition to several visual references to Hitler and Himmler. *Conspiracy* avoids these strategies for explaining the Final Solution and instead keeps Hitler in the background with one key exception, a confrontation between Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger and Heydrich that illustrates Hitler’s willingness to keep his name separate from the actual formulation and carrying out of genocidal policy. In this scene, Rudolf Lange has just angrily brought up the mass shootings he carried out in Latvia and asked Heydrich if these murdered Jews had been “evacuated,” the euphemism employed in the film up to this point:

HEYDRICH

Yes, in my personal opinion, they’re evacuated.

KRITZINGER

Explain?

HEYDRICH

I have just done so.

KRITZINGER

That is not--, no, that’s contrary to what the Chancellery has been told, I have directly been assured, I have—that we have undertaken to

²¹⁷ An English translation of the historical letter to Heydrich from 31 July 1941 can be found here: http://www.ghwk.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf-wannsee/engl/goering.pdf

²¹⁸ Mandel, “Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01.” 28-29.

systematically eradicate all the Jews of Europe, that possibility has been personally denied, to me, by the Führer!

HEYDRICH
And it will continue to be.

KRITZINGER has been fearful that all the assurances he and Lammers have received have been lies. He stands again, HEYDRICH looks at him coldly. His following words, sounding regretful, are in fact a warning: this is the way it is, accept it.

HEYDRICH (CONT'D)
My apologies.²¹⁹

This scene powerfully illustrates *Conspiracy*'s emphasis on the *removal* of Hitler from actual policy as well as the SS using the meeting at Wannsee to assert their dominance over the other institutions present at the meeting. However, it is important to note that HBO's promotional material contradicts the more functionalist aspects of the film. An HBO press release from 5 April 2001 mentions "the blueprint for Hitler's Final Solution" and characterizes the Wannsee Protocol as "the details of Hitler's maniacal plan."²²⁰

Historians have also commented on *Conspiracy*. Alan Steinweis reviewed *Conspiracy* for *The American Historical Review*. Steinweis points out that the above-referenced scene presents Kritzinger as a "bold dissenter" and that this is a negative example of artistic license. Steinweis also notes scenes where Heydrich pulls Kritzinger and Stuckart aside as dramatic inventions.²²¹ Steinweis unfortunately reviews the film as historians are prone to—he focuses on several scenes that obviously contain fictional elements, or "artistic license," and avoids engaging with the film's broader arguments and vision. The review also compares *Conspiracy* with *Die Wannseekonferenz* and actually argues that the former may be more historically

²¹⁹ Ibid, 45-46.

²²⁰ HBO Films, "Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star in HBO Films' Conspiracy, Debuting May 19" (HBO Films, April 5, 2001), Box 15, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

²²¹ Alan E. Steinweis, "Review of Conspiracy," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 2 (2002): 674-75, 674.

accurate because it discusses the killing process in more detail, as mentioned by Eichmann during his interrogation.²²² Steinweis also criticizes the appearance of Kenneth Branagh's Heydrich, but he praises Stanley Tucci's "pro-active anti- Semite" Eichmann as "a refreshing departure from the old, and inaccurate, cliché of the "banal" bureaucrat."²²³ Although the review is ultimately positive, it suffers from the common problems encountered when historians write about film as discussed in Chapter One, e.g. it is mostly concerned with dramatic license and does not engage with the film on a deeper level.

The deeper analysis missing from Steinweis' review—and most historians' writing on film—would investigate the production history of the film in order to determine the filmmakers' intent, the historical argument, if any, and the research process behind the film. In other words, it would echo the three levels of film analysis outlined by Toplin, which were discussed in Chapter One. Examining the film on its own without considering production history or the biographies of the filmmakers provides both the historian and the reader with an incomplete picture. An investigation of the production history of *Conspiracy*, especially material found in the archive, provides us with a more complete picture of the film and the goals of its creators.

The only other major historical publication that directly engages with *Conspiracy* does not suffer from this issue. Simone Gigliotti's "Commissioning Mass Murder: Conspiracy and History at the Wannsee Conference," which was briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, engages with the film in detail and is primarily concerned with *Conspiracy* as a "visual essay about language" and how "Mandel uses language...to create an alternative 'Wannsee Protocol', a visual text of historical and biographical possibilities."²²⁴ For Gigliotti, Mandel made

²²² Ibid, 675.

²²³ Ibid, 675.

²²⁴ Simone Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder." 128.

“interventions” into the historical debate surrounding the Wannsee Conference and “offered a plausible historical truth to the document’s discursive silences” by having characters discuss killing methods in detail.²²⁵

Most importantly for this study, Gigliotti focuses primarily on the writing process and on Mandel, the screenwriter, as the most important figure in the process of creating historical films. She takes issue with historians who view films like *Conspiracy* as “exercise[s] in translation” rather than interpretations in their own right.²²⁶ One of her most valuable contributions is her discussion of how the film is concerned with the “erosion of language’s veneer;” the characters begin the film with euphemisms for mass murder and dance around them again and again until words finally mean what they really mean: “The juxtaposition of excess and austerity is reflected, respectively, in the abundance of food and alcohol and the use of restrained language, but over time, this gulf collapses.”²²⁷

One of Gigliotti’s criticisms—that the accents are inauthentic and should be German rather than posh English accents, comes off as half-right.²²⁸ It is safer for an English-language film to use native English accents than have the characters speak English with German accents; *Schindler’s List* is one of the few films to pull this off without undermining the seriousness of the subject matter and descending into camp. It would have been better to remake the film in German than have Stanley Tucci attempt a Viennese accent, which might have distracted the audience. The English-language nature of *Conspiracy* is one of the film’s biggest flaws, even though it gave the film a much wider audience, ensured that it would be backed by the financial behemoth HBO, and allowed the filmmakers to draw from the best

²²⁵ Ibid, 131-132.

²²⁶ Ibid, 131.

²²⁷ Ibid, 129-130.

²²⁸ Ibid, 132.

of Great Britain's acting talent. The fact that *Die Wannseekonferenz* was shot in German meant that actors could directly quote from the Protocol without the danger of mistranslation—though this is of course undermined when non-German speakers rely on subtitles to watch the film; the English subtitles included with its current release are woefully simplified and destroy a lot of that film's nuance and detail. Ultimately, Gigliotti's article stands out as the only academic analysis of *Conspiracy* carried out to date that moves beyond either a simple review or footnote. Indeed, the vast majority of historical works consulted for this study that mentioned either film simply listed them alongside other Holocaust films or briefly summarized them as part of a "sourcebook" style list of recent Holocaust films.

Although virtually ignored by academic historians other than Gigliotti and Roseman, the two dramatizations of the Wannsee Conference remain popular for historians directly involved with creating educational programming for both higher and secondary education. Both films have been used as pedagogical tools. In a recent volume consisting of articles about the Conference and current research trends, Wolf Kaiser, historian and head of the pedagogical department at the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial, suggests using extracts from both films as "points of entry" for students.²²⁹ Similarly, film historian Barry Langford advocates using both films in the classroom "because students benefit from being able to compare different dramatic treatments of the same historical material."²³⁰ Langford also lists *Conspiracy* as part of a family of films which have an "explicitly educative or consciousness-raising agenda, or which consciously engage with academic historical interpretation of the Holocaust..."²³¹ Another volume on Holocaust education uses

²²⁹ Wolf Kaiser, "Die Wannsee-Konferenz als Unterrichtsgegenstand: Anregungen und Dokumente für die Sekundarstufe II," in *Die Wannsee-Konferenz am 20. Januar 1942: Dokumente Forschungsstand Kontroversen*, ed. Norbert Kampe and Peter Klein, 1. Auflage (Köln: Böhlau Köln, 2013), 437–52. 438

²³⁰ Langford, "Mass Culture/Mass Media/Mass Death: Teaching Film, Television, and the Holocaust," 64.

²³¹ *Ibid*, 64.

Conspiracy as a teaching tool and asks students to “[d]iscuss the irony of the detailed, meticulous preparation of the food served at the meeting as well as the beautiful setting.” A more awkward assignment asks students to: “[i]magine that you are at the Wannsee Conference. Write and deliver a dissenting argument that could possibly have changed the tone and intention of the conference.”²³²

III. Comparing *Conspiracy* with its Predecessor

This section returns to the central theme of the thesis by examining *Conspiracy* and *Die Wannseekonferenz* as works of public history. On the surface, *Conspiracy* and *Die Wannseekonferenz* are quite similar films. Nevertheless, key differences expose the differing historical arguments of the two films and how changes in historiography can be seen on screen. The biggest difference between the historiographical arguments of both films is that *Die Wannseekonferenz* adopts what can be labeled a broadly “intentionalist” view of the Holocaust, e.g. everything was part of a plan that Hitler had set in motion beginning in the 1930s. *Conspiracy*, while not completely abandoning Hitler as the chief architect of the Holocaust, adopts what can be termed a more “functionalist” view of the Holocaust, where competing interests within the Third Reich vie for supremacy and many innovations and expansions of mass murder occur without needing detailed orders from Hitler. This chapter previously examined intentionalist aspects of *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Chapter Two discussed the more functionalist historiographical argument of *Conspiracy*, particularly when examining a memo by Colin Callender, head of HBO NYC Productions. It is important to note that the terms “functionalism” and “intentionalism” refer to general schools of thought and are not

²³² Miriam Klein Kassenoff and Anita Meyer Meinbach, *Studying the Holocaust Through Film and Literature: Human Rights and Social Responsibility* (New York: Gefen Publishing House, 2004). 36.

necessarily labels that historians adopt for themselves. These labels are also too broad and ignore the nuances of respective historical arguments. For example, Mark Roseman's *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting* can be interpreted as a broadly functionalist argument, although Roseman acknowledges (none of them argue that Hitler was irrelevant), that a Hitler order may have kicked off the Third Reich's campaign of mass murder sometime in the summer of 1941.²³³ Roseman also argues that the "pure functionalist" view does not emphasize Hitler enough.²³⁴ With these brief categorizations of both films in mind, it is now time to compare and contrast other aspects of the films in detail.

Both films portray the meeting's purpose largely as a vehicle for the SS to assert its dominance over other institutions, but emphasize this in different ways. *Die Wannseekonferenz* places all of the SS on one side of the table and as a group, they are more intimidating than in *Conspiracy*. In the latter film, the SS congregate together in a celebratory mood before the meeting, and, as in the German film, tell jokes and strut cockily around the room. Both films note that the villa is an SS-operated building, uniformed SS hotel staff are seen throughout each film. *Die Wannseekonferenz* repeats the myth that the villa was also Interpol headquarters, something that was not debunked until after the film's release. The confusion was due to a typo in the original conference invitations, which listed the wrong address.²³⁵ In a pre-production document, Ani Gasti, HBO's director of development, discusses the SS' bid for power and how the production should portray it:

...this should be the subtext of the whole meeting. Emerging as the debate about actual policy emerges, i.e. we need a much more innocuous, surreptitious taking of control by Heydrich as a subplot, as the bigger plans and solutions are discussed. Don't hit us over the head with it up front.²³⁶

²³³ Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 41.

²³⁴ Ibid, 12.

²³⁵ Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee* 56-58. 114.

²³⁶ Gasti, "Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee - Notes Review." 3-4.

This difference between the two films—and also, the lack of a “pre-meeting” between members of the SS, allows *Conspiracy* to build dramatic tension as the audience is not exactly sure about what the SS is planning, unlike in *Die Wannseekonferenz* where Heydrich’s general plan for the day is laid out at the beginning.

Both films discuss killing methods, something not overtly present in the Protocol but hinted at by the lines “practical experience which is of great significance for the coming Final Solution of the Jewish question” and “the various possible kinds of solution.”²³⁷ In *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Major Rudolf Lange mentions gas vans very early on in the film; eventually the use of Zyklon B is mentioned. *Conspiracy* initially refrains from discussing killing methods and instead uses the euphemism “evacuation” which is found in the Protocol. Lange, the youngest conference attendee and the only one who had had “practical experience” in executions, shifts the meeting’s tone from one of evasiveness and understatement to one that directly addresses the SS’ hitherto secret campaign of mass murder, illustrating Gigliotti’s view of *Conspiracy* as fundamentally about the veneer of language:

Upon hearing “evacuation”, Lange slowly gets to his feet during the following.

HEYDRICH (CONT'D)

-they, too, will fall within categories...(DEPENDING UPON ETC)

LANGE

(he speaks reasonably, but the liquor has triggered a deep anger)
Could you, General...sorry...I have the real feeling that I evacuated 30,000 Jews already by shooting them. At Riga. Is what I did “evacuation”? When they fell, were they “evacuated”?

Everything stops. The accepted euphemism has been challenged.
EICHMANN’s “no” wag of the head and staying hand stop the
STENOTYPIST.

²³⁷ Roseman, trans., “Appendix A: Translation of the Protocol,” in *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting*. 111, 118.

LANGE (CONT'D)

...There're another 20,000 at least waiting for similar "evacuation." I just think it's helpful to know what words mean. With all respect.

This time it's KRITZINGER who raps on the table. Angrily.

EICHMANN

If I might suggest that it's unnecessary to- (BURDEN THE RECORD WITH THIS QUESTION)

HEYDRICH

Yes. In my personal opinion, they're evacuated.²³⁸

From this point forward, conference participants openly discuss mass murder and increasingly abandon euphemism. By the end of the film, the death factories of Treblinka, Belzec, and Auschwitz are mentioned along with the effects gassings have on the victims' bodies. This is based upon Eichmann's postwar testimony in which he stated that participants frankly discussed the various means of mass murder at their disposal:

Today, I no longer have any detailed recollection of this matter, Your Honour, but I know that these gentlemen stood together and sat together, and in very blunt words they referred to the matter, without putting it down in writing.²³⁹

The Eichmann of *Conspiracy* is a more complicated figure than the version found in *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Stanley Tucci's portrayal is both informed by and a pushback against Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" view of Eichmann. By the end of *Conspiracy*, Eichmann is perfectly positioned to take over for Heydrich after the latter's assassination. Tucci's Eichmann is not a minor figure or glorified secretary, but rather a cunning figure waiting to take control: "[Eichmann's] personal technique with people was to be more silkily persuasive, and he often played the card of self-deprecation and modesty. He was different

²³⁸ Mandel, "Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01." 45.

²³⁹ Adolf Eichmann, Eichmann Trial, session 107, 24 July 1961. Cited in Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 99.

in that way from Heydrich.”²⁴⁰ In contrast, Gerd Böckmann’s portrayal of Eichmann in *Die Wannseekonferenz* is a more extroverted figure, he drinks with other conference attendees earlier in the film and has much more of a sense of humor than the Eichmann of *Conspiracy*. In *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Eichmann berates subordinates at several points whereas in *Conspiracy*, he intimidates them in a quieter, more subdued manner.

The two portrayals of Heydrich are similarly flipped, Kenneth Branagh’s Heydrich is incredibly intimidating and threatens both Stuckart and Kritzinger with a trip to a concentration camp or worse in several scenes. This behavior is not historically-documented and is curious considering the fact that Heydrich held roughly the same rank as the majority of conference attendees.²⁴¹ Dietrich Mattausch’s Heydrich is very different—he uses humor and charm to get his points across rather than intimidation. In this sense, the Heydrich of *Die Wannseekonferenz* is a vainer, human figure than the one found in *Conspiracy*. Nevertheless, Branagh explained his portrayal by citing a “psychological profile” created by Mandel:

Our scriptwriter, Loring Mandel, tried to do a psychological profile of Heydrich, looking for elements of behavior that may not appeal but perhaps lend to understanding his character, whether it be hatred of parents, a childhood trauma, some physical or mental disability, something that might illuminate his motives. Nothing seemed to make conventional psychological sense. His utter lack of compassion, lack of pity, revealed a man who has a buried conscience and as a result, seems to be soulless.²⁴²

It is difficult to say which incarnation of Heydrich is more historically correct. Branagh’s portrayal of Heydrich as an utterly pitiless man, especially when he threatens Stuckart and Kritzinger, runs the risk of veering into stereotype and making a Heydrich into a caricature or monster rather than a real human figure, his reign of terror in Prague notwithstanding.

²⁴⁰ Stanley Tucci, quoted in HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star in HBO Films’ *Conspiracy*, Debating May 19.” 3.

²⁴¹ Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*, 57.

²⁴² Kenneth Branagh, quoted in HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star in HBO Films’ *Conspiracy*, Debating May 19.”

When alone with other members of the SS, Heydrich drops the mask a bit and relaxes as he realizes that the meeting has succeeded with much less difficulty than he had anticipated.

Mattausch's portrayal avoids these pitfalls, and maybe his interpretation of Heydrich as a more jovial figure is so incongruous with our own stereotypical views of Nazis that it hits a more powerful emotional and historical chord: these people *laughed* about murdering millions and thought it was all in a day's work (this is also featured in *Conspiracy*, just not with Heydrich's character). While Branagh certainly delivers a more memorable performance and likely gets to a truth about Heydrich, especially as a man who wielded enormous power at the time and seemed to be Hitler's heir apparent, Mattausch's performance serves as a needed corrective to the stereotypical view of Nazis as inhuman monsters.

Major Rudolf Lange serves an important purpose for both films. He represents the Third Reich's campaign of mass murder in the East, especially mass shootings, which provided the catalyst for the switch to industrial killing. The Lange of *Die Wannseekonferenz*, played by Martin Lüttge, is drunk for most of the film; this sometimes serves as comic relief. Lange also provides firsthand testimony about the effectiveness of various killing methods; he is in a sense Heydrich's star witness to help him justify shifting towards industrial-scale killing. In contrast, Barnaby Kay's portrayal of Lange in *Conspiracy* is that of a man haunted by mass shootings, a Nazi with PTSD. Although no historical sources point to Lange either being drunk at the meeting or traumatized due to his experiences, it seems that both Mommertz and Mandel used Lange as an avatar for the campaign of mass murder up to that point in time.

Indeed, some historians have pointed to Lange's "special role" at the meeting (he was by far the lowest ranking attendee) as logical only due to his "practical experience" in

carrying out mass shootings.²⁴³ The use of Lange to explore the campaign of mass shootings serves to 1) tell the audience that mass killing was going on *before* the Conference and 2) that the practice of mass shootings had worn down units and that a shift towards industrial killing with poison gas was now underway. This latter point is underscored in *Conspiracy* by Lange's clear shellshock and echoes the graphic descriptions of murder found in Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, a very influential piece of Holocaust historiography released in the 1990s (keep in mind that the production team consulted Browning, this is discussed in Chapter Two). In one scene, Lange discusses mass killings with Kritzingner and illustrates *Conspiracy's* concern with euphemism and language:

KRITZINGER

This is more than war. There must be a different word for this.

LANGE

Try chaos.

KRITZINGER

Yes. The rest is Argument. The curse of my profession.

LANGE

I studied Law as well.

KRITZINGER

How do you apply that education to what you do?

LANGE

It has made me...distrustful of language. A gun means what it says.²⁴⁴

One potentially problematic aspect of both films, and of *Conspiracy* in particular, is that the audience is made to empathize with the characters. Film is a particularly adept at creating empathy and cultivating historical empathy is a key task of the historian. However, when the subjects are all committed Nazis involved in the Final Solution, creating empathy

²⁴³ Angrick and Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga*, 260.

²⁴⁴ Mandel, "Conspiracy. by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01." 68.

for them could pose an ethical dilemma. *Conspiracy* excels at putting the audience inside the heads of Wannsee attendees, but it veers close to creating sympathy for mass murderers like Lange. Perhaps this is another argument in favor of the film by creating empathy for the perpetrators, it implicates the audience in their crimes and unsettles them more than if the film had adopted a more distanced perspective. One of the key differences in the two films is that *Conspiracy* has the advantage of high-caliber British and American actors who each bring something to their roles that elevate their characters beyond their lines in the script, whether through Kenneth Branagh's icy glares at subordinates or Barnaby Kay's thousand-yard stares as his character thinks about the mass shootings he has committed.

A key area in which *Conspiracy* reflects changes in historiography is its focus on the education levels of the Wannsee attendees. In one scene, Klopfer has all the lawyers present in the room raise their hands, emphasizing how highly-educated and motivated the men around the table are. These are not mere ideologues. As Mark Roseman has noted, "[i]t remains one of the most striking characteristics of Wannsee that most of the best educated round the table were also long-standing Nazis," which smashes the stereotype of the uneducated ideologue or neutral bureaucrat.²⁴⁵ The men at Wannsee, especially the SS at the table, represent an "uncompromising generation" of highly-educated and ideologically committed men who "were not part of a marginal or excluded minority but were members of the mainstream elite from the very heart of German society."²⁴⁶ This growing emphasis on a generation of highly-educated mid-level Nazi officials was part of a wave of scholarship during the 1990s, as was the exploration of the Holocaust pre-Auschwitz, most notably via Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*. In one production document, HBO research assistant

²⁴⁵ Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 89.

²⁴⁶ Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, trans. Tom Lampert, 1 edition (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010). 7.

Andrea Axelrod cites the highly-influential German historian Hans Mommsen's "The Civil Service and the Implementation of the Holocaust," as well as earlier works by Browning.²⁴⁷ The production team was aware of what was then cutting edge historiography and utilized it in the finished film.

The fact that both films took different historiographical positions is important because historians often dismiss dramatic films as surface-level productions that do not engage with historical issues on a substantive level. This examination of both films exposes this stereotype as false. Not only did the filmmakers engage with and respond to historiography, but they included it in the finished films. They were not concerned about boring an audience with too much history and gave their audiences credit enough to understand the nuances on display. As discussed earlier, the key difference between these two films is *Conspiracy*'s more functionalist approach regarding how the Holocaust unfolded as opposed to *Die Wannseekonferenz*'s more intentionalist approach. Both of these approaches reflect Holocaust historiography of their respective times and places, but it is still too simplistic to simply label one film as "functionalist" and the other as "intentionalist." Each film draws from both, but *Conspiracy* is more functionalist than its predecessor, as evidenced by a clearer quarrel between agencies, the almost total absence of Hitler from the narrative, and the emphasis on initiative from below as seen with the film's depiction of Lange and Eichmann, with the latter's initiative especially emphasized. *Die Wannseekonferenz* avoids more egregious errors (like *Conspiracy*'s portrayal of a conflict between Klopfer and Stuckart, which has no basis in reality and is discussed in Chapter Two), but also has its own quirks: it depends too much on drawing a direct line between Hitler and Wannsee and relies on a lot of exposition at the beginning, which removes some of the dramatic tension gained by

²⁴⁷ Axelrod, "Overall Issues Part II." 1.

Conspiracy keeping Heydrich's plan hidden at first. For its time, *Die Wannseekonferenz* is an excellent work of history on film; most of its shortcomings can be chalked up to the historiography of the day, budget limitations, or to a few stylistic choices characteristic of the period. *Conspiracy* is the better film and a much better drama, but in some areas its historical flaws render aspects of it inferior to its predecessor. Many of *Conspiracy*'s shortcomings can be placed at the feet of HBO's marketing campaign, which place Hitler at the center of the narrative and make the claim that Wannsee was the "smoking gun" of the Holocaust.²⁴⁸ The actual film is much more nuanced than the marketing campaign suggests and its poster emphasizing the swastika further harms the film's image. Ultimately, both films remain important and each one is strengthened by a viewing of the other; they are, in a sense, valuable companion pieces that reflect the historical climates in which they were made.

IV. Conclusions

Conspiracy is by no means the only example of doing history on film that public historians can find valuable. This study has engaged with *Conspiracy* on all three levels of Toplin's rubric for film analysis. It has looked at the film as such and explored the biographies of the filmmakers. In contrast to other explorations of history and film, this study has looked into a film archive in order to see what the filmmakers actually thought; one now has evidence of their intent and how they constructed their historiographical argument. This study has examined the production history of *Conspiracy*, including the writing process, script structure (footnoting), HBO correspondence, meeting minutes, research material, and extensive script reviews from both historians and HBO's research team. It illustrates the process of making a historical film in a way that can prove instructive

²⁴⁸ The film's tagline was "One Meeting – Six Million Lives."

for future films. This study has shown that the writing process is central to creating historical films, as noted by Bruno Ramirez.

Although not a replacement for a historical monograph, *Conspiracy* is more than a dramatic movie with the Wannsee Conference as window dressing. The film engages with historiography, argues that the Conference represented a turning point in the direction of the Final Solution, challenges the stereotypical image of Adolf Eichmann, and manages to do so in real time. As Mark Roseman has noted, Wannsee is a “kind of keyhole, through which we can glimpse the emerging Final Solution.”²⁴⁹ *Conspiracy*, while flawed, serves as an excellent example of the possibilities of doing history on film and if more filmmakers and historians looked to it for inspiration, the landscape of historical filmmaking would only be richer. Until *Son of Saul*, *Conspiracy* was one of the most notable Holocaust dramas utterly devoid of sentimentality and schmaltz, one of the typical charges faced by the genre. *Conspiracy* is unique because it manages to convey the horror and scale of the Holocaust without showing a single violent act. It portrays the “unexplainable” by showing the audience a group of middle-aged and young men meeting over lunch—and it does so without holding the audience’s hand by using title cards or exposition. Andrea Axelrod summed up the central tenets of the film in one of her most important comments on the script review process:

Making this into a classroom history lesson is not going to work...The dramatic situation here is a bunch of people are gathered together for a purpose they do not know, but that frightens them because – having been summonsed [sic] by an authority of which they are terrified – their lives will not be the same after. It is *Waiting for Godot*, only Godot actually comes. When he does he is not as they thought he would be. This is the drama of the piece. The more we add explanations and clarity and add historical footnotes [on screen] the more we undercut the very strength of the drama we want to tell. But, but, but – the banality of evil. We must also avoid the pitfalls of conventional dramatization: dramatic revelations, bold confrontations, big turning points, gasping denouements: everything is very

²⁴⁹ Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*. 79.

small, ordinary, and even silly....the drama of [*Conspiracy*] is how the worst crime of history was done by ordinary men, worried about the weather and their jobs [sic] security, their digestion and their sex lives, their dog and their wife.²⁵⁰

Conspiracy is also a historical artifact, a snapshot of HBO programming during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. HBO continues to produce thought-provoking historical dramas, but has recently shifted towards more blockbuster-style, special effects-driven series. While *Conspiracy* is evidence of more creative freedom for filmmakers in the television landscape (as opposed to the traditional Hollywood studio system), HBO's reluctance to produce *Complicity* illustrates the limits of creative freedom found on that network. In 2003, Mandel submitted a revised draft of *Complicity*. This version of the script removes all of the "unfilmable" plotlines discussed earlier, including those depicting Eichmann. Instead, this script focuses solely on the Roosevelt and Churchill administrations with the Bermuda Conference as the centerpiece. Gerhard Riegner has a smaller role. This version of *Complicity* is much more feasible and is largely free of the hokier plot devices encountered in the earlier script.²⁵¹ Unfortunately, it is clear that HBO passed on this improved version of the script as well.

Complicity, with its damning portrayal of the Roosevelt administration, was a bridge too far for HBO and ended up in development hell. HBO's dismissal of the project seems like an artifact of an earlier time in which Americans trusted their government and resisted any tarnishing of the "Good War" myth. The biggest problem with *Complicity* is simply that it was ahead of its time. Upon reading the *Complicity* script, one is struck by how fresh and

²⁵⁰ Andrea Axelrod, "Combined Notes on 4/19/00 Draft," 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

²⁵¹ Loring Mandel, "Complicity, First Revised Draft" July 10, 2003, Box 10, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

relevant the material seems from our own vantage point almost two decades later. In an era characterized by a massive refugee crisis, renewed nationalism, rising xenophobia, and the apathy of Western governments, a revival of the *Complicity* project seems like just the sort of project HBO could get behind.

Most importantly, this study has demonstrated that dramatic film can be a public history method and should be treated as such. As Paul Mommertz puts it, these films are “monographs” and deserve to be taken seriously as works of history; they are not mere entertainment or money-making vehicles. This study echoes Anton Kaes, Robert Rosenstone, and other historians who argue that film is one of the most powerful and accessible methods available to historians and should thus be taken seriously as both an art form and as a historical method. Historians need to expand their methodological toolkits to include film analysis, and yes, even filmmaking, if they hope to remain relevant to twenty-first century audiences used to a primarily video-based method of learning. YouTube now hosts excellent historical content that would have been unthinkable a decade ago²⁵². Online streaming services like Netflix have completely abandoned the television system and use their subscription revenue to create dramas of their own; several critically-acclaimed historical dramas have already premiered online. The future of the historical film—outside of the Hollywood studio system, which has largely retreated into escapist superhero blockbusters and endless sequels—seems bright.

Finally, *Conspiracy* takes ninety minutes to explore a very difficult history in a largely uncompromising fashion. Little is spelled out for the audience, the film requires one’s attention and, unlike its predecessor, does not even offer comic relief. The history presented by *Conspiracy* is profoundly unsettling and disturbing. As public historians, it is imperative

²⁵² See “The Great War” <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheGreatWar>

that we confront difficult pasts and make them known and comprehensible to wider audiences. Whether through German efforts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or recent efforts to explore America's often-ignored slaveholding past, it is up to historians and yes, filmmakers, to ensure that the darker aspects of history are not forgotten and replaced with whitewashed, comforting tales so-often encountered in the public sphere. If “never again” was the watchword post-1945, public history projects like *Conspiracy*, which illustrate the sheer ordinariness of the people and events that shaped some of the worst crimes in history, serve as valuable warnings from a not-so-distant past about our own “ordinary” time. The past can sometimes be unsettling—and our depictions of that past should be as well.

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Traveling Exhibit, “States of Incarceration,” Humanities Action Lab, Indianapolis, IN and New York, NY, August 2015-April 2016.

Digital History Project “Celebration and Intoxication in Berlin,” (*Feiern und Rausch in Berlin*) Berlin, Germany. Spring 2015.

Tour Guide, “Traces of Violence,” Memorial SA-Prison Papestraße, Berlin, Germany, May 2015

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